

The Exchange

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Category: Teen Wolf (TV)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Regency, Alternate Universe - Royalty, Arranged Marriage, Betrayal, Bisexuality, Due to the fact they are in an arranged marriage at a time when consummation was a thing, Explicit Sexual Content, F/F, Gerard is as always a raging misogynist, Gore, Historical Inaccuracy, Homophobic Slurs, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Marriage of Convenience, Mentions of Rape, Mildly Dubious Consent, Minor Character Death, Misunderstandings, Past Abuse, Past Chris Argent/Victoria Argent - Freeform, Period Typical Homophobia, Protective Siblings, Supernatural Elements, violent imagery

Language: English

Characters: Alan Deaton, Allison Argent, Chris Argent, Deucalion (Teen Wolf), Gerard Argent, Jennifer Blake, Kali (Teen Wolf), Peter Hale, Scott McCall, Sheriff Stilinski, Vernon Boyd

Relationships: Chris Argent/Peter Hale, Jennifer Blake/Kali

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Summary:

Prince Argent sends to the Hales to fulfill an ancient marriage treaty. Perhaps he should have worded the request more carefully.

Written for the 2014 Petopher Secret Santa Exchange from the prompt REGENCY AU WHERE CHRIS IS THE PRINCE AND THE HALES SEND PETER INSTEAD OF TALIA. I hope you like it!

Chapter 1

Author's Note:

You didn't say *what* he requested Talia for, so I went for the whole arranged marriage trope. Because I love the arranged marriage trope and have been wanting to do a Petopher one for awhile.

A few notes: 1) I had to create a country for Chris to rule. So there's that. And, well, I figured Peter may as well come from a fictional country as well. Chris' country is fairly isolated, so while they are aware of the fashions and conventions of the Regency, they don't necessarily follow them.

2) Plastic sheeting wasn't actually invented until the mid-1800s, but for the purpose of this story we're gonna pretend it was a few decades earlier.

3) Edward Jenner was a real person and the details of his inoculation attempts are true. The rest of the medical stuff is just made up. I am not a doctor. I don't even play one on TV.

4) By rights, Chris and Peter should be wearing pantaloons in almost every scene. However, I cannot even write the word pantaloons without giggling, because I am actually a twelve year old, so we are just going with breeches in exchange. But I do know the difference.

5) Don't think about the geography too much. Just...don't.

6) Chris is around 35 in this story. Peter is 25. At that age, I picture him as a mix between Ian and Fjordbak, with his features beginning to settle more into Ian's. Your mileage may vary. The important thing is that everyone is very, very of age.

"Allison." The prince called his young daughter's attention back to him as he placed the last pin in her hair, securing the intricate knot together. It was a task his father had never stopped criticizing him for undertaking; a task far beneath his station and, in his father's eyes, his sex. A task rightfully meant for Allison's chambermaid. But it was a task that allowed Chris a few precious extra moments with his daughter, before the duties of the kingdom pulled him away for hours –

sometimes days – at a time, so it was a task he had absconded with early on, and a skill he had honed as ruthlessly and efficiently as any with blade or pistol. After ten years, none could tell whether it was his hand, or Jill's, that had been at her hair that day.

Prince Christopher Argent: Guardian of the Kingdom, Slayer of the Undead, Hairdresser Extraordinaire. He allowed himself a small, compressed smile at that, before placing a kiss on the top of his twelve year old daughter's head and addressing her.

“Please remember what I've asked of you. The Lady Talia comes from a highly influential family in Genovia. This treaty has been in place for hundreds of years and our honoring of it is essential in the survival of both our countries. The tide must be kept at bay.” He had never sheltered his daughter in the manner of some parents; like those in England or France or other countries who had the luxury of living in ignorance. She would be head of state one day; better to start now than some ephemeral point in the future. It was what his parents had done with him and what their parents had done with them and so on and so forth unto the very founding of their tiny mountain country. It was the nature of the burden they carried.

“I need you to give her the respect she is due.” Allison's glare in the mirror was unconvinced, and he tried a different tact, even though it was one that made his heart clench as if he were betraying Victoria. “Besides, it will be nice to have a mother, don't you think? Someone a little better at picking out dresses than I.” He gave a tendril of her hair a playful tug. “I think we about drove Miss Elizabeth mad her last trip over.”

When Allison spoke, he was unprepared for the vitriol in her voice. “I don't *need* a mother. I never had one before and I don't need one now.”

He froze. “What is this nonsense?” You had a moth -”

“Yes, father, I *know*. And she was tall and fierce and beautiful and brave, and she died saving a score of our people, including me. How would I ever forget, since you remind me of her perfection every day?”

Victoria, perfect? God's blood, she would give him a tongue lashing had she ever heard him describe her as such. Possibly challenged him to a duel to teach him a lesson. No, she had not been perfect, but she had been perfect for *him*. He

thought their youthful marriage had probably been the last time he had truly defied his father's orders. Gerard had certainly not wept when she had been slain just a few short months after Allison's birth.

He leaned his hip against the dresser and spoke carefully, searching for the right words. "Your mother *was* fierce and brave and beautiful. And clever and bold and sharp-witted. And she saved all of our lives when she held off the Undead. But she was also harsh and unbending and undiplomatic. With a quick and wicked temper. She was flawed and human and I am sorry if I ever gave you the impression otherwise. But I loved her, and I miss her. It will do us good to no longer be alone.

"But, Father – *why*? You are not alone." In all her childish wisdom she said earnestly, "You have me. And I have you. And Jill and Mistress Morrell when you are at the battle. Besides, I know you didn't wish for this. I heard the discussions with Grandfather."

Ah, his little sneak. But wide ears were not necessarily a bad thing for the future Queen to possess. "Because he wills it so. And what do we obey, little one, above all things?"

She sighed. "Family and Crown. Grandmother never would have forced you! If I were old enough - !"

"But you are not, are you? And until you are, your grandfather rules."

"But he's *gone*! He might not even come back! He was probably eaten!"

"Until there is a body --"

She crossed her arms petulantly, and he wouldn't have been surprised if she had stomped one delicately slippered foot. "I don't *want* anyone new!"

He pulled her into his arms. "I know, my little arrow. But this will be for the best. For us, and for our people. Talia is sensible and wise and strong. She knows the rapier as well, which is unusual for women from the Continent. She can help you supplement Captain Stilinski's lessons."

His daughter was not happy, but he was confident she obeyed when it came time. She would not shame him or their family by acting the brat.

“Why don't you change into your boots? You should have plenty of time to visit with Wolfsbane before the caravan arrives.”

The possibility of spending the better part of the afternoon with her beloved stallion did the trick of at last returning a smile to her face. “Yes, why don't I?” She rose to her toes and placed a kiss on his cheek before darting across the room and through the door that led to her dressing room. He didn't worry so much on her when she was at the stables. Mr. McCall and his son would ensure her safety, and even at her young age, she was almost at a point where she did not need a guard at all. His late wife would be proud of her. And he thought she would approve of Talia. If time and distance weren't against them, he would wager she and Victoria would have been bosom companions.

He set Allison's dressing table to order and quietly left the room.

* * * * *

Deaton was in the armory when Chris entered, and gave a perfunctory bow of his head. “Your highness.” Chris had yet to figure out how his closest friend still seemed to be looking down his nose at him even when performing necessary oblations, but there had never been any sense of ruler and subject between them, even when they were small. Which is likely why Chris trusted Deaton's advice more than any official court adviser.

The man in question raised an eyebrow when Chris sat down across the long workbench from him and picked up a steel crossbow bolt. There was much promise in the exploding arrowheads he and Deaton had been experimenting with. The trick was in ensuring they detonated upon contact, but were not so sensitive as to detonate at a simple jostle from the user's quiver. The exact balance was still eluding them.

“Your highness. I would have thought you would have been busy primping for the Duchess' arrival.”

Chris snorted. “Lob off, Alan. While I will court the Duchess with every bit of care and time required for appearances to be met, I doubt she is any more deluded than I at exactly what this is: A match her family is duty bound to agree to by a long outdated treaty. She is nothing more than her country's sacrificial lamb.” His mother had been in the process of renegotiating the treaties with the Continent families at the time of her death, and while he understood the

importance that particular article served in the revitalization of the bloodlines of their isolated country, he hoped Allison would pick up the battle of reform the late Queen had been waging.

“Such bloodthirsty imagery, Prince.”

“Bloody symbolism for a bloody place. If she looks to find the Beau Monde here, she will be sorely disappointed.” There was grace and dignity aplenty in Befastia, but nowhere to the degree of the courts of the Continent. In a land where man and woman alike were expected to fight as well as dance, such mincing pleasantries were easily pushed aside. He suspected the matriarchal nature of their leadership was also responsible for much of their shedding of popular custom.

“Which, if I recall, is why we chose to send the bride missive to Genovia when the King demanded a match. They are closer to our sensibilities than the other continent families. Certainly much closer than the English. I do not think the Duchess will be so easily horrified.”

“No, she will not.” While he had not spoken to the duchess since his tour three years ago, they had gotten along rather well in ideas of politics and society. He considered her a friend, as much as he could consider anyone outside of Befastia as one.

“It is strange, though.” Alan's voice turned thoughtful. “That they would have waited so late in the season to come. A few more days and the snows will have sealed the continent pass for the year. I would have expected them to come months ago, when we first received word of their receipt.”

It was an oddity, although he assumed much preparation had been necessary to uproot a life and prepare a proper sendoff. And that was not accounting for any dowry arrangements. But there had been some worry among the palace staff when the word of the late departure had arrived. Chris himself had considered sending a party to meet and speed them, and had only just been appeased at the runner who appeared two days ago with news of their eminent arrival.

“Perhaps the politics of the last year delayed them. The Hales likely would have been much wanted by the crown in re-consolidating their hold after that unpleasantness.” Although Genovia was trying to suppress the seriousness of it, Chris' diplomats reported the royal family had come dangerously close to being

overthrown in an unexpected internal coup. He privately had some sympathy for the rebels; Genovia had become dangerously stuck in the past, despite the attempts of many of the noble families to move it forward. There was little representation for the lower nobility and none whatsoever for the commoners, and the current king did not demonstrate the appropriate noblesse oblige to compensate for the virtual silencing of the masses. He knew the Hales shared his concern. He and Talia had dwelt much upon the subject on his last visit to Genovia.

“No matter,” Deaton concluded. “I suppose the Duchess will be able to tell you the reasoning herself. Still, Chris -” Deaton finally dropped the honorific he hadn't been required to use in private for years and carefully set the explosive he was working with on the table. “-- it concerns me that there has been so little communication from such a supposed strong ally. Just the formal acceptance, which was barely ten words, and then the message of their departure. No attempts to negotiate the terms of the contract or the amount of supplies we demanded for the coming year. It is almost unheard of.”

Chris nodded his acknowledgment. “It worries me as well. But the Hales have never dealt us false, not in all the history of the treaty. We've given them no reason to begin now. Besides, Genovia would be the first in the path of Lucien's horde if the Argents withdrew their protection. They would not wager the fate of their country so rashly.”

“Still...”

Chris bowed his head in agreement, fingering the dagger that never left his side. “Still...”

* * * * *

The late evening sun had begun casting a motley of shadows across the courtyard when the last runner arrived, reporting the location of the arriving caravan a mere half hour out. The crunch of snow beneath Chris' booted feet was nearly drowned out by the excited whisperings of the court as they arranged themselves along the circumference of the enclosed space and along the beginnings of the wide, cobbled drive that led away from the palace and toward the villages surrounding it. The servants and chambermaids that weren't of sufficient rank to claim a place outside could be seen with their faces pressed

against the glass of the windows, hoping to be among the first to catch a glimpse of their new princess.

A chance of new information to gossip on was not the only reason the palace was in a tizzy of anticipation. The wedding party would also bring with it supplies and foods that grew scarce during the long months of winter ahead. The air today was brisk, but not yet frigid, but Chris knew his country like a barmaid knew her clientele, and within two weeks, the weather would turn bitter cold and wet, and the brief warmth of his country would be over for another eight months.

Most of the staples the Hales brought with them would not stay at the palace, but would be taken out and distributed to the surrounding towns, helping to mitigate any shortages in the ever varying harvest. Aside from the food, there would be a new platoon of troops. For their sake it would have been better had Talia arrived earlier. There would have been at least some training before they had to be sent to the pass. But what came would come and none could change it.

Allison was nowhere to be seen, and Chris was disinclined to force her out. It would be better for she and Talia to have their first meeting away from the curious eyes of the court.

Chris stepped out from the doorway, nodding to the heads of the eight noble families, who had made the journey from their estates to witness Talia's arrival and carry their agreed upon allotments back to the towns under their care. They would make the journey again two months hence, at the end of the prescribed courting period, in order to attend the nuptials.

He pressed his lips together to keep from grinning as Stiles, Captain Stilinski's son – who by rights should be inside the palace – slipped between the skirts of the Ladies Blake, darted out a hand and stole a chocolate off one of the wide platters held by a member of the front house staff, and then darted away again before he could be caught. The scamp was a favorite friend of Mr. McCall's son Scott, and becoming more accomplished as a pickpocket by the day. Chris suspected an apprenticeship under Deaton was in his not so distant future.

A horn sounded, and then another, and as the crowd stilled, the crunch of wheels on snow could be heard coming closer. Chris straightened his stance, locking his hands firmly across the small of his back as he unconsciously fell into the posture that had been trained into him from the earliest days of his youth. Deaton

came to stand just behind and to the side of him - the only person that was there due to Chris' preference rather than position - and the Lords and Ladies fell into their own prescribed positions at his back.

Only the carriage carrying Talia, her handmaid, and her chaperone would actually enter the courtyard. The wagons of supplies, the entourage, and the troops would have been met further down the boulevard and guided to the appropriate places on the palace grounds. Talia's personal servants would already be in the palace, preparing her rooms to any specifications that the Argent's own staff had not anticipated.

This part – the arrival – was purely for pomp and circumstance, for the ceremonial presentation of the bride to be to the noble houses. Chris hated it. Always felt that in these events he was a show horse being paraded about the park. But duty was duty.

The murmuring of the crowd outside the gate rose to a small roar and then, finally, a heavy travel carriage appeared, pulled by a team of eight stock horses, obviously chosen for the breadth of their chests and the strength of their legs rather than appearances. A wise move on the Hale's part. The delicate bloodlines favored by most of the continent would not have survived the journey.

Chris could almost taste the anticipation in the courtyard, everyone's collective breath held as the carriage drew to a stop. Mr. Finstock snapped his fingers and three of the kitchen staff scurried forward, heavy trays bearing warmed, moistened hand towels, an array of chocolates, and several goblets of mulled wine held in their hands. The last one hundred miles of the journey to the continent pass would have been rough ones, over purposely ill kept roads and no inns to speak of. The Argent's country was kept isolated for very real reasons, but their new arrivals would no doubt appreciate being able to refresh their hands and faces and warm their bellies upon arrival.

The driver climbed down from his perch, face barely visible from the hat and muff wrapped tightly about it. He pulled down the steps of the carriage, opened the door, and stepped back. Chris' eyebrows pulled together as the man shoved gloved hands into his pockets. Even without seeing his face, something about his posture spoke of nervous apprehension. Chris flicked his gaze to where Captain Stilinski stood. His armor was purely ceremonial, but none of them were stupid enough to rely only on armor anyway, and Chris was pleased to see he had

caught the discordant note as well and was subtly gesturing to the small cadre of soldiers with him. The captain of his personal guard had lived through too many battles to be caught unawares.

The first out of the carriage would be Talia's chaperone, likely her aging aunt Meridith, whom Chris had met once as a teenager, and who had smacked his hand with her cane when she had caught him in the kitchen playing poker with the servants. Which was why Chris' confusion and suspicion increase when it was a *man* who descended, maybe a decade Chris' senior. He bowed deeply, then rose, and ignored all the offered trays.

“Your royal majesty. We are grateful for your welcome and for the end of our journey. The Hales are proud to once again have the opportunity to fulfill the terms of the treaty.” He spoke calmly, with an air of regal ease, but left no space for Chris to interrupt. “I am Lord Deucalion, the Duke's cousin. I was fortunate enough to have kept close acquaintance with your father, although business in India kept me from meeting you on your last visit. The Duke sends his regrets at your father's disappearance and hopes for his quick return.”

Chris took a step forward, careful to keep his face smooth of any expression but welcome. “His well wishes are much appreciated. We, too, mourn the absence of the Kind. However --”

“However,” Lord Deucalion interrupted smoothly, drawing a gasp from the serving maid holding the chocolates, “--you no doubt are eager to move to the matter at hand.” He stepped to the side, nodding to the shadows inside the carriage.

“Your royal majesty, may I present Lord Peter Hale.” A collective gasp went up as first one breeches and boot clad leg appeared, and then another, and then an entire gentleman appeared from the carriage. He ignored Deucalion's hand and descended fluidly. As soon as his feet hit the ground, he bowed just as deeply as Deucalion had, but not before Chris caught the tiniest of smirks twist across his lips.

Peter Hale. Talia's younger brother by some seven or eight years, which would put him somewhere around his twenty-fifth year now. He had been touring the continent when Chris had visited Genovia last, and his only other memory of the man had been when he had accompanied Gerard on a visit of state to Genovia as

a teenager, where he vaguely remembered an impetuous child being called on the carpet for sneaking into a ball well after hours.

Chris stared, dumbstruck, as Lord Hale straightened. His dark hair was pulled back into a neat queue, and sharp, crystal blue eyes met his squarely without flinching. He was strong featured, reminiscent of his mother and Talia more than his father, and despite the long journey, his cravat was impeccably knotted. All of this the prince noted with one look, but none of it answered the question on the tip of everyone's tongue.

“Where,” Chris asked precisely, dumbfounded shock giving way to a quietly banked angry, “is Lady Talia? What, pray tell, is your purpose here?” The disrespect and mockery in this action was so great that if his father had been here, their treaty with Genovia would have been declared null at this instant. Chris preferred to weigh his decisions more closely.

Deucalion moved to speak but was stopped by Peter's hand on his arm. “Your majesty.” Lord Hale's voice was smooth and rich. “I am pleased to finally meet you. I have heard much about you from my sister and look forward to deepening our acquaintance.” Every word was properly placed, properly respectful, but there was something snapping in the blue of his eyes that told Chris there was far more under the surface than those bare phrases.

“My dear sister is in Genovia, of course. She and her husband have settled quite nicely into his estate, I believe. As to your second question, I'm afraid I don't understand.” A sly glint entered Peter's carefully widened eyes, belying the pretense of his words. “Why else would I be here but to answer the summons, your majesty? I'm here to fulfill the betrothal.”

Chapter 2

“Is this in jest?” Chris could hear his voice in his own ears. Cold, but so very, very calm. He tried extremely hard to never lose his temper in front of his people. The very last thing he wanted was for them to fear him in the way they had come to fear his father.

It was so quiet in the courtyard that every intake of breath in the party surrounding him could be easily heard. As well as the metallic slide of a short sword sliding partway from its sheath. Lady Jennifer, he imagined, and he held up one cautioning finger from the hands still tucked tightly at the small of his back.

Deucalion was leaned into Peter's ear, whispering furiously, but Peter shrugged him off and raised his chin. “My father does not indulge in humorous displays. We have done as the House of Argent demanded; you have no grounds for offense.”

“No grounds for--” Chris could feel the fury building in his chest. Did this *boy* have any idea the calamity they would face if-- “I sent for a *bride*.”

“No.” The smirk hidden at the corner of Peter's mouth ghosted across the whole of his lips. “You sent for--”

“Your highness.” Deaton's voice was a soothing calm at his elbow. “Perhaps we could take this discussion inside. The air is growing quite chilly.”

Deucalion was quick to add his voice to Deaton's. “Yes. Perhaps a warmer room would be best.”

The prince was suddenly returned to awareness of just how many eyes were upon them, watching this little drama play out. “Of course.” He gave a small nod. “It was thoughtless of me to leave our honored guests in the night air. Forgive me.” By all rights the coming confrontation should take place in the formal audience chambers, with the nobles gathered to watch. But as angry as he might be at the betrayal of the Hales, he was not so cruel as to publicly humiliate them. Peter Hale likely had as little choice in his sending as Chris had had in sending the request, and Chris was the last person to justify punishing the

offspring for the parents' transgressions.

He bowed stiffly to the Lords Hale. "The servants will show you to the drawing room. I will join you momentarily." He spun on his heel to face the Houses. "My lords and ladies, please allow Mr. Finstock to show you to the dining room. After you have dined, the stores should be ready for your inspection."

"Your *Highness* --"

He cut Kali off before she could get started. "We will speak more later." He did not wait for further commentary – and there would *be* plenty of commentary; the house of nobles had their fair share of sway and more than their fair share of opinions, and he rarely stifled their voices – but cut a path straight through them and into the sweeping entry way of the palace. He was immediately enveloped in warmth, making him aware for the first time how cold the weather had grown in those few short moments.

Technically he supposed it was far more a castle than a palace, built centuries ago when his ancestors first settled the area, and designed to withstand long, harsh winters and repel the attacks of any enemy, dead or alive. The inside was far more richly appointed and modern than the outside suggested, but it would never hold a candle in terms of size or grandeur to most of the abodes of royalty in the warmer, more placid countries. But it was home, and Chris loved it with a fierceness that defied all reason.

No matter how he hated his father's edict, he had found himself, in unguarded moments, looking forward to again having someone who might grow to appreciate the stark beauty of his homeland as he did. That hope was now soured, but he had to figure out how to deal with the fallout. And figure out exactly what game the patriarch of the Hale family was at. The Argents had never once failed at holding up their end of the ancient treaty. Had given untold amounts of blood and lives to protect the lower countries from the tide of the Undead. And while occasionally one of the treaty families would balk at paying their yearly tribute, never once had the issue been unable to be resolved. And never once had the family been the Hales.

He slipped through a door, unobtrusively cut into the wall behind a tapestry, and climbed the private stairs to the royal family's chambers. He allowed himself a moment in his rooms, to splash water on his face as he attempted to untangle

what had just occurred, then traveled down the hall to Allison's. As suspected, she was there, flopped face first and extremely undignified across her bed. He sat on the edge beside her.

"I missed you at the welcoming."

"I watched from my window." Her voice was muffled by the bed sheet. "He's a *man*, father. I thought Lady Talia was coming."

"That was my expectation as well. I would like you to remain in your rooms until this is sorted out. Jill will bring you dinner."

"Are you going to send soldiers? Raze the Hale estate to the ground? Let the Undead eat their babies?"

He rolled his eyes. "I told you to stop reading that ridiculous book. I should have Scott whipped for bringing it to you."

She rolled over, her eyes wide. "You wouldn't, father!"

"Of course I wouldn't. Mr. McCall might quit if I did. And Mrs. McCall would *surely* quit then. And where would we be without our esteemed horse master and our invaluable surgeon? Why, the kingdom would fall within hours, don't you think?"

She giggled. "You're ridiculous, father." Then she sobered. "But you have to do something. Otherwise we'll appear weak. And the other families will take it as a sign they can withdraw as well."

He sighed. "You will make a fierce queen one day. Promise me you'll stay here in your rooms as I asked."

"Yes, Father."

"Thank you. I suppose I've kept them waiting long enough." He kissed her forehead and stood. "I'll come back to tuck you in."

"Too old!" She shot back, and his heart wept just a bit at the continual signs she was growing beyond the child he had carried on his shoulders.

“Yes, your highness,” he said lightly, and then left her to her thoughts.

* * * * *

When he entered the drawing room, Peter and Deucalion broke off their whispered conversation and rose to their feet, Deucalion looking appropriately respectful, and Peter, utterly defiant. It was an incredible and foolish mark of bravery for a man in as shaky a position as he. By rights, Chris could choose to execute them both and face very few repercussions. It was extreme, but he was royalty, and royalty was known to take extreme measures. The Lord Hale should be grateful Gerard was not in the room.

Chris poured himself a tumbler of scotch and sat down in a large, richly appointed chair. He did not invite the others to do the same. He sipped the scotch for several long moments, surveying the two over the rim. Usually after a moment or two under his stare, the uncomfortable silence growing longer and longer, men would begin to fidget. These did not. Impressive.

Finally he set the glass down on the polished table beside him and steeped his fingers together under his chin. “Speak,” he commanded.

Deucalion cleared his throat. “As Lord Hale stated, we have come in good faith.”

“The Duke was to send me a wife.”

“Your missive stated you were invoking article twelve of the treaty, did it not?”

Chris inclined his head, watching Peter more than Deucalion. His eyes were narrowed and his lips were pursed and Chris was distracted for a ridiculous moment by the fact that the color of his coat had been chosen to exactly match the blue of his eyes.

“You know it did.”

“Then you have to be aware the article itself simply states that any member family agrees that, should a member of the house of Argent request a marriage pact, the family asked would forthwith fulfill the request with an appropriate match. The specific sex of that match is never specified.” He finished evenly, with a raised eyebrow.

“And that was to take into account the fact the request may be made on the behalf of a son *or* daughter of our line. Do not deal in double talk, my lord.”

“Then perhaps,” Deucalion said quietly, “you should have been more specific in your request.”

“The Duke *knew* I intended Talia. What other match could I possibly make?”

“My nephew --”

“Is standing right here and does not appreciate being talked over.” Deucalion frowned at the impertinence of his nephew, but Peter dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

“What my father *knew*, was the peculiarities of your country's marriage laws, no matter how much you've hidden them. So stop pretending anything has been broken, just because he was smarter than you. You have your troops, you have your supplies, you have your fiancé. The treaty has been filled to the letter. Your highness.” The honorific is thrown in as a clear after thought, but Chris was too busy reeling from Peter's revelation to be offended. Outwardly, he knew his face was the perfect picture of control, but internally his mind was racing.

There was much discussion by the country's scholars as to why certain...proclivities...seemed more pronounced here than in other places. Some argued it was due to the fact that soldiers often lived in close quarters together for months at a time, that when the only person to rely upon for survival was one of the same sex, it was inevitable that attachments should grow in unnatural directions. Some debated dispassionately for biology. Some believed it was a kind of sickness spread by the Undead, a subversive way to destroy humanity without weapons.

His mother had not given two fiddlesticks about the *cause*; she had only cared that people who were routinely dying for their country were being denied the right of carrying on a life with the ones they loved. Her last act before her death had been the rallying of both houses in the passage of a new law, one that gave any consenting adult the right to marry any other consenting adult.

But it had never, *never* been intended to apply to the nobility, the Ladies Blake notwithstanding. Blood lines must be maintained, regardless of personal desires. *Everyone* understood that. And the knowledge of the law had certainly never

been intended to travel beyond the borders of their nation. As isolated as they were, it shouldn't have been an issue. It was why it hadn't even crossed his mind when he'd sent his missive to the Duke.

The chill in his voice was enough to cool even the roaring flames of the room's fireplace. "This is why he waited so late in the season to send you, isn't it? He knew if I sent you back now, with winter at our heels, it would be the same as condemning you to death. Would be condemning any of our soldiers to death as well. He bought himself a reprieve, a time to prepare for any retributions. And the ability to claim innocence of any breach of the letter, no matter the breach of the spirit.

"And yet," he finished thoughtfully, studying Peter with narrow eyes, "it's odd he seems so willing to sacrifice *you* to our whims."

There was a subtle flaring behind Peter's eyes, a small tick in his jaw, but then he drew himself up and the cool formality all nobility learned from birth fell over his features. "I am sorry you believed my parents would ever send my sister to a place they might never see her again. She is far too important to them."

And you are not? While he did not know them well, he had always found the Duke and Duchess to be good, fair-minded people. He could not understand this side of them, that would willfully engage in trickery, would willfully sell one child for another.

A decision must be made. Either he must reject the match and send Peter back in shame, must spread loud and clear the message that the Hales were in disgrace and that the Argents were still no family to be trifled with, or he must accept a marriage he had never wanted, with a partner he neither knew nor trusted. The answer was very clear when he considered what the King's perspective would be. Peter and his uncle would be thrown in irons until the pass cleared, and then taken back at the point of the sword. The Hale's would be publicly shamed, and the families of the treaty would turn their backs on them to a one.

Chris threw back the rest of his drink and stood, his face hard and implacable. "Very well." His voice fell into the easy cadence of ritual intonation. "The House of Argent accepts the marriage match presented by the House of Hale. May the blood of our houses mingle, may the fates of our families entwine. The treaty still stands in faith."

Peter stilled, and the color dropped from his face as he darted a look at Deucalion, who kept a more closed countenance. “What?”

“As you pointed out, all terms of the missive have been filled. I would not have it be said that the Argents do not keep the faith, no matter how poorly your family might have kept theirs.”

“You cannot want this!” Peter hissed, the cloth of his jacket stretching tautly over bunched muscles as he clenched his fist. “I know you were married to a woman.”

“His lordship is correct,” Chris said blandly. “My late wife was most assuredly female.”

“I cannot give you heirs. This would negate the entire intent of the treaty!” Peter spoke intently, as if he somehow thought Chris did not already know everything he was saying.

“I have an heir. I need no other.” Despite his anger at the Duke's maneuvering, a small, dark part of him delighted in the fact that every single one of Gerard's designs had been dashed in one. His father would be apoplectic.

“This is *ridiculous*!” Deucalion shot a hand out to Peter's shoulder and the other man fell mute, staring at Chris with clenched jaw.

Chris studied him carefully, from the bottom of his booted feet, to the top of his perfectly coiffed hair, as realization came. “You didn't think I would accept the match.”

“No one in their right mind would accept this!”

“You *hoped* I would not accept this match.”

In that moment, the foppish, non-threatening air that had surrounded Lord Hale as a cloak slipped away, and something dark and weary and spiteful took its place. “Oh *course* I hoped you would reject it. What civilized human being would want to be stuck in this godforsaken country whose citizens are still little more than *barbarians*. It does not matter what you choose to call yourself. It will never change what you *are*. I can assure you I would rather have chanced the journey back.”

Chris' voice was frigid, the fury he had kept tightly reined all evening doing its best to break its bonds. "I think it is good we finally understand each other. And since we can both agree this marriage is nothing but a farce, there is no need to carry through with any sham of a courtship, is there? No need to have the heads of house make a return trip when their townships will need them most."

Peter stared at him, stony eyed, the lush of his top lip quivering like he was doing his best to keep it from curling up to a snarl.

"There was to be a dinner dance tomorrow night, in order to fete your sister. The timing will serve just as well for our wedding."

"Sire," Deucalion said low. "There are formalities to arrange...a wardrobe...surely you cannot expect him to appear with so little --"

Chris cut him off with a sharp motion of his hand. "I think I have been accommodating enough for one day. As my dear betrothed said, we *are* little more than barbarians."

He bowed, short and shallow. "Now, if you will excuse me. Your rooms have been prepared and the housekeeper has arranged for an assortment of foods to be brought to them. I'm sure you will appreciate the opportunity for rest and refreshment. I will see you on the morrow, to make the final arrangements."

He turned and walked from the room, not looking at his betrothed again.

* * * * *

He found himself in the stables, the light of the lanterns casting shadows over the stalls as he carefully curried his stallion. Allison had gotten her love of the place honestly. The steady motion calmed him, enough that he was already ashamed of his earlier outburst. It was unworthy of him, and not the way he had intended to set the tone for his future marriage. And honestly, what could he have expected from Peter? Joy at being sacrificed by his family to an unnatural marriage to another man? Anticipation for a life in a cold, hard place so very foreign from the warm, cultured climes of the continent? A life with a man ten years his senior and a people and war he did not know?

In the end they were just two men trapped under the weight of their families and it was no good tearing at each other in resentment of that. They would have to

find some peace, if they were to manage even a semblance of a life together. For Allison, if for nothing else. He would not have her grow up under the same pall he had. Until that was possible, perhaps the best peace possible would be to give Peter space. He had not intended to take the guard out this year, had planned to spend those weeks courting Talia, but under these new circumstances-- Perhaps he should reconsider.

There was a rustle of hay behind him and he turned around to find Mr. McCall regarding him quietly.

“Pardon me, sire.” He held up the saddle in his hands. “I was just putting the tack away. Greenberg was exhausted, so I sent him home.”

He waved the apology away. “Please, carry on, Mr. McCall. I gave no warning I was coming.” He waited until Mr. McCall went to the tack room and returned, but before he could leave, Chris spoke.

“I suppose the gossip has made its way here already.”

Mr. McCall inclined his head. “Yes. It has.”

“And what does it say? Please, speak freely, Rafe.”

He pressed his lips together for a moment before he spoke. “They say the young lord is handsome. They say he brings the air of the continent with him. They say the way he looks at our country is an insult. They say that if your father were here he would use him as bait for the horde.”

Chris ignores the last bit. “And what else do they say?”

“They say that despite the insult, they think you will honor the match. Because you are the Prince Argent, and you could do no less.” He paused. “Did they wager well?”

He smiled small, just a thin upturn of lips. “They did.”

“Ah. Well then. I'll pass it along that perhaps the staff should stop gossiping about their new prince.”

“I wish Finstock luck with that.” The hordes would come in winter, the Lady

Jennifer would win a duel by spring, and palace servants would gossip. These three things were unalterable truths.

“Anything else?”

“Melissa went to check on the cook's son's injury. She said there was quite a shouting match coming from the Lord Hale's quarters.”

“Hmm. How is Ryan?”

“Healing well. The infection is finally gone. He won't have to lose the leg.”

“Thank God,” Chris murmured.

Rafe made a wry face and Chris coughed a laugh in response. “You're right. God had less to do with it than your wife's skills.” God had proved himself an absentee deity in their country centuries ago, and while they had their church and they had their priests, it was always taken side by side with a heavy dose of pragmatism.

“Indeed. Now, if I may take my leave, lord? Deaton has requested a meeting.”

It was not unusual for people in his service to wear more than one hat.

“Of course. But Mr. McCall? I will need Bolt ready to ride with the troops day after tomorrow.”

“But we thought -”

“Plans have changed.”

Rafe bowed as he stepped back. “I will have Greenberg ready his battle gear first thing tomorrow.”

Chris returned his attention to Bolt, stroking his head and murmuring nonsense to him as he fed him an apple. Allison would be furious with him when she found out he would no longer be staying. He would have to find some way to soothe her anger.

There was another noise behind him, and he turned, thinking Rafe had returned.

But standing at the door of the stall was a man wearing the livery of the Hales, his carriage giving him away as a soldier. He was young, probably only a few years older than Allison herself. He bowed deeply and waited until Chris told him to rise.

“Your majesty.” His voice was startling deep for a boy so young. “Please forgive my intrusion. I’m Sergeant Boyd, one of the recruits sent from the Duke.”

“And yet you still dress as a Hale.”

“Again, forgive me, sire. A uniform will have to be sewn. There was nothing that would fit.” He gestured vaguely to the wideness of his chest.

“Ah. I see. Well, the seamstresses will have you turned out in no time.”

The Sergeant nodded stiffly and then, after a brief pause, asked urgently, “Are the rumors true? Did you accept the match?”

Chris raised a brow at Boyd’s forwardness, but in the end, chose to answer. The men must be unsettled, waiting to know their Lord’s fate. “Yes, the wedding will proceed.”

A whooshing breath escaped Boyd’s mouth and some unknown tension seemed to fall from his shoulders. He reached into his jacket and withdrew a thick, cream colored envelope.

“Lady Talia asked me to deliver you this letter, should you accept her brother.” As Chris stood bemused over this revelation, the sergeant crossed the distance between them and put the envelope into his hands. Then he bowed low and withdrew back into the night.

Chris turned the letter over and again in his hands for a long moment before sliding one finger under the flap and breaking the wax seal. He unfolded the rich stationary that fell out, revealing the bold, curving strokes of Talia’s handwriting.

Dearest Prince,

Forgive me for being unable to give you this message in person. I know you expected me to be in your presence in this moment. And I know that if your father were there, Peter’s match would have been rejected forthwith. But he is

not there, and you are of a more temperate and compassionate nature than he. I have held confident that you would hold true to the faith, even if my parents do not seem to have held to theirs. If you are reading this letter, then my confidence has been born out.

My father is too proud to ever admit to anything other than this being entirely his design, would rather be thought to be designing rather than desperate, but owing to the ties of our friendship, and the love I bear my brother, I would that you understand the truth, if only so that you may find it in your heart to not judge Peter too harshly.

Please know that if your missive had arrived a mere two months earlier, I would be your betrothed, rather than Peter. But I know Deaton will have had word of the political unrest that swept our beloved country last year, and how our monarchy was very nearly unseated and brought to civil war. Our monarchy is on shaky ground, as are all the nobility, and due to our position at the king's ear, our family's counsel and choices are integral to our people's future. As my father's health has weakened, my mother and I have taken on more and more of the day to day responsibilities of the Duchy, and as such, my father feels if I were to leave, the consequences for our country would be dire.

While I know such arrangements would not be unusual for your fair country, where women are valued just as much, if not more, than the male of the species, you have to be wondering why it is I, and not Peter, that would be elected to lead in Genovia. I can only say that for reasons I have never fully understood, the natural love of a parent for their child has never been extended by my parents to their youngest child. You will understand, having met my parents, and seeing how they dote upon and indulge me, how it pains me to admit their failing for Peter, but it is something I cannot deny. I have done my best, from the time I was able to comprehend the differences in our states, to shield him from this, but I fear he knows well that the coffers he draws freely upon are but a poor substitute for their lack.

My father was well aware of what a refusal of your missive would mean, but was likewise aware of the consequence for our own country should he acquiesce. You can imagine his quandary, torn between loyalties. It is here that I must risk our friendship and admit that it was I that told him the peculiar law your mother had enacted, that it was I who concocted the idea to send Peter in my stead. But I beg of you to believe me when I say I never would have done it if I had not

thought it would lead to greater happiness on both your parts.

Peter has lived too long under my shadow; his efforts to outgrow it have led him down dangerous and rash paths. He is a good man. Brilliant, innovative, and incredibly protective to those few he deems worthy of admittance to his closely guarded soul. He is a good man, but his goodness has been stifled here in Genovia. He needs room to grow, a place where he is not constantly found lacking through no fault of his own.

And you, my dear Chris (I hope you will forgive the familiarity; you once gave me the liberty and I hope I still retain it), you need so much for someone to balance that rigid self control and self flagellation you have shackled yourself in. You and I, we are too much alike; I fear we would have become solemn and somber statues in our old age. Peter will challenge you, and if given your faith, will protect with his life those things you hold dear. And, if you will forgive me for speaking frankly, our talks have led me to believe that you would not find the fact that he is a man entirely repugnant.

Chris closed his eyes and let out a long breath before returning to reading.

...As for Peter, it pains me to say that his inability to successfully mask his own attractions did nothing to soften my parents indifference to him. Peter knows nothing of my intervention in this matter, and I beg of you to let him remain in ignorance.

Now, my dear prince, I have laid the whole of it before you, and leave it in your good hands to judge. I hope you come to the conclusion this action was not taken in malice, and that, should we meet again, you will still see fit to call me friend.

He could see where she had begun to close the letter, but, under some further consideration, had scratched through the closure and begun again.

Chris, I beg you to have patience with my brother. It is well worth the time and effort it will take to get behind the mask he has long worn as protection from things that are not within my rights to explain. Just as it was well worth my time and effort to get behind that mask of yours. If nothing else, give him the kindness you would have given me, as surrogate of our friendship.

Yours in friendship and faith,

Talia Hale Renaldi

There again, it seemed she decided she was not done, but rather than scratch out again, she had added a postscript.

Please take good care of the Sergeant with whom I trusted this letter. He is a loyal and skilled soldier. You will be well protected with him at your back.

And then, one more addition. It was very like Talia, who had a mind that was always at work.

Do not trust Deucalion. He is a snake.

Chris carefully folded the letter and tucked it inside the breast of his jacket. Bolt nickered beside him, and Chris absentmindedly patted his withers as he pondered all that Talia had said.

* * * * *

“Surely you jest!” Peter was staring at him across the table, where Mrs. Marus, bless her soul, was demanding they actually have a *tasting* of the food she was scrambling to revamp for the feast tonight. Apparently a wedding feast was entirely different from a presentation dinner, and Chris' ears were still ringing from the scolding she had given him for the lack of notice of the change. It was the first time he had seen the Lord Hale since their conversation last night, and regardless of any shouting matches with his guardian, Peter did not look any worse for wear from the late night and early morning.

“I don't jest,” Chris returned calmly, then pointed to a lingonberry tart. “I prefer these over the lemon ones. You?”

“You said yourself this marriage is a farce! It is 1815, Prince! We live in the modern era; no one is checking bedsheets for virgin's blood these days!” He took a moment to transfer his sneer to the tarts. “The lemon are preferable.” He flicked his fingers at the lingonberry. “These...*red things*...are cloyingly sweet.”

“Then the lemon it is,” he acquiesced easily. “You will become accustomed to the lingonberry.” The lemon was a luxury acquired specifically for this occasion; the lingonberry was the native fruit of the region. “And you yourself said we were little more than barbarians, did you not? But as you said, this is the modern

era. There will be no one waiting outside the door, even had it been Lady Talia in your stead.”

“Then there is no need of --”

“But, as you said, it is the modern era, which means annulment is available in both this country and yours. And the treaty does not allow for annulment, on either of our parts. The marriage *must* be consummated, regardless of personal distaste.” The blue in Peter's eyes grew stormy, but Chris pressed on. “It is duty, and neither of us would be here if we did not understand duty.” If anything, Peter's face grew darker, although Chris was unsure what was so offensive in his words. He simply sought to assure Peter he would not be some oaf, constantly taking his bedding rights. Arrangement or not, he would not consider his spouse his *property*. “I give you my word, Lord Hale, that after tonight, the door twixt our rooms need never be opened again.”

“That certainly is a great comfort, Prince,” Peter said icily. “Pray tell me, will you also allow me a lock and key?”

Chris' brow wrinkled in confusion. “If you wish. But I do not break my word. You will learn I do not speak where I cannot follow.” He nudged a platter of meats and cheeses toward the other man. “Cook would know your preference on these.”

Peter's hand slammed down on the table. “I do not *care*. One does not generally ask the sacrificial beast what it would prefer for its last meal!”

Chris drew in a deep breath through his nose, forcing his jaw to unclench. He was trying very hard to honor Talia's request. “Careful, my lord. You will offend cook. And the last person you want to offend is the one who prepares your meals. She has worked for weeks preparing this in your honor. None of these people here are to blame for the situation we find ourselves in. It is unjust to take your ire out on them.”

“She prepared it for my sister, *sire*. No need to be coy.” Peter's lips curled up in a sardonic smirk. Chris was beginning to wonder if they knew how to smile in any other way. It was a pity, really, that they were put to such ill use. They were full enough to put a woman's mouth to shame.

“She *prepared* it for my *betrothed*. Which, by choice of your family, is *you*. And

again, she is not to blame for your ill fortune. I will not have you maltreating our staff.”

“His majesty will not allow it then?” Both Peter's eyebrows were raised to his hairline as he stared challengingly at Chris. Chris was growing weary of the constant use of his honorifics. His people did not generally stand so much on ceremony, and the way Peter's tongue wielded it felt more like a weapon.

Peter nudged the platter away from himself. “Pick as you like. I bow to your wisdom.”

Chris was about to answer the blatant sarcasm in his words when he caught a small movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned and found Allison standing at the door of the breakfast room, watching their exchange with narrowed eyes.

“Then we shall let Allison choose.” He motioned her to come in and she took the seat at his right, fixing Peter with a baleful eye. All hopes he had of Lady Talia working with him to ease Allison into the idea of their new family were dashed now, and he have very low expectations of Peter showing a similar sympathy.

And he had yet to inform Allison of his impending departure, mainly because he was a coward and hated to bear both the blunt of her displeasure and the inevitable weight of her disappointment. He had yet to give the news to Peter, either, but he doubted *that* conversation would be met with anything other than joy. Allison, though...it had been years since they had spent an entire winter together. But she was used to these months with her governess, and Marin and Captain Stilinski were more than able to ensure her protection. She would not like it, but she would accept it. If there were anything, beyond skill in battle, that the Argents excelled in, it was in accepting that which could not be changed.

“My lord, this is my daughter, the Princess Allison. Allison, this is Lord Hale. Perhaps tomorrow you could take him out and show him the stables. Do you like to ride, Lord Hale? The Whittemore's are some of the finest horse breeders in the north; we'll have to procure you a proper mount before long.”

Peter's mouth twisted into something amused. “I do ride. Although I was required to leave my stallions in Genovia. They would not have been...appropriate for the trip.”

Chris' nostrils flared as he easily caught Peter's innuendo. How *dare* he – In front of his *daughter*. Did the man have *no* sense of respect?

“Allison, sweetheart, would you like to --” His intent to send Allison away so he could speak freely was interrupted by a throat clearing. Mr. Finstock stood at the door.

“Forgive the intrusion, your majesty. There is an issue in the west wing.”

Chris' grip tightened briefly on the fork he held before he forced it to relax. He carefully set the utensil down and stood. “Of course. I'll be there shortly.”

He placed his hand on Allison's shoulder and squeezed it affectionately, then bowed his head to Peter. “I shall leave you and Allison to the task of choosing our dinner.” Even should Peter attempt some sabotage of the meal, Allison was already well trained in planning a state dinner and was more than equal to the task. “Until this evening, then.”

Mr. Finstock was waiting for him when he left the room, his wild array of hair even more shocking than usual. “Was anyone hurt?”

“No, sire,” he answered, as they moved with haste down the hall. “The captain came quickly enough. But it was a close thing.”

Chris ran a harried hand through his hair and nodded. “I will take care of it.”

* * * * *

Peter stared at the creature sitting across the table from him. She, in turn, stared right back, a mulish look to the jaw that most definitely did not come from her father.

She spoke, in a voice so haughty Peter could not help but admire it. “You have brought embarrassment to our family.”

Well, it appeared the little beastie did not fall far from the tree. He picked up a lemon tart and popped it in his mouth. He would eat his boot before he admitted it, but damned if the things weren't delicious. “Don't despair, child. I have confidence it won't be the last time.”

She sniffed her freckled nose at him, in what he would bet was a stellar imitation of her father. “The correct address is *Princess Allison*. And one day I will be your queen.”

“And just think, tonight, I’ll become your stepfather. Won’t that be exciting.” He snapped his teeth at her, but was rewarded with a singularly unimpressed raise of an eyebrow. Close to the tree, indeed.

He shoved the plate of lingonberry tarts at her. “Shove a few of these in your mouth. Let us see if it succeeds in shutting you up.”

She made a face and pushed the dish away. “Those are my father’s favorites. Cook makes them special for him. I prefer the lemon.”

“Well, at least you have good taste.” He changed tacks. “What’s in the west wing?”

She shrugged and used a fork to stab at a piece of meat. Ham, he thought. “Storage. Old paintings. We don’t use it. Father says our family is far smaller than we once were. The price of standing guard.”

She said it like it was something she has heard a million times before, something she didn’t even question. He knew from what Talia had told him that here the women ruled, that here the women fought just as well as the men. He wondered if she was already prepared to die for everyone else.

She took another dainty bite. “You’re a man,” she said bluntly.

“Observant chit, aren’t you?”

“My mother was a hero, you know. My father still loves her. He’s *always* going to love her.”

Talia had filled him in well on the incomparable Victoria Argent. And even if she had not, the numerous portraits of her strewn across the palace would have clued him in. It was as if he had suddenly been transported into one of those penny dreadful sheets that shoeless urchins peddled on the corners, trapped in the dour, abandoned house with the handsome, ever mourning widower. Except of course, he would need to acquire bosoms and a quim to really play the part. And that wasn’t going to happen any time soon.

He pushed down the bitterness that was eating him whole, the betrayal he had felt when he'd realized he was openly being traded because he was of less worth than his sister. He wished he did not love her so. It would make it easier if he could hate her as well as he hated his parents. If he did not care so much that he was a continual disappointment to her as well.

Allison was watching him, obviously waiting for him to react. She had much to learn if she was hoping to beat him at his own game. “And *I* am going to always love the strawberry tarts our cook used to make. One loves where one can, don't you think?”

“Stiles says you won't last the winter. He bet ten to one you can't handle a sword or a pistol. Says Lucien's army will sneak in and eat you for breakfast.”

“Can you? Handle a pistol or sword? I'll wager they'd think you'll taste better than I, princess.”

Quicker than he could see, the girl twisted her wrist and somehow delivered a dagger into her palm. She struck without hesitation, flicking the blade across the room so that it embedded itself in a tapestry, dead center the eye of a fanciful unicorn. Peter looked on, bemused.

“My father is better.” She declared proudly.

“Is he now?” He declined to display his own talents. Better to keep such things secret, in case he should need them in the future. He'd always found the value in holding truths close to his breast.

Allison nodded, then pushed the ham at him.

“Taste it.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

She shoved it more insistently. “Yes.”

“Christ. Fine, you insistent brat.”

He stabbed a piece of ham and put it disdainfully in his mouth. Then had to fight from moaning out loud. “Dear Lord, where did your father *find* this woman? He should have married *her*.”

Allison nodded sympathetically. “She's my favorite. Here.” She pointed to three soup tureens at the end of the table. “Try those. Then you can tell cook we want all three.”

Chapter 3

He stood on the dais, Peter at his side, as each of the noble heads were presented by Deaton. It was one of the very few times of the year the formal audience chamber was used, with its wide spaces giving enough room for every noble dignitary and his household, as well as a good number of the country folk that were tied to the palace in some way, shape, or form.

Allison stood at his side, her hands clasped in front of her, and Deucalion stood a little behind Peter, as his representative. He looked as calm and benign as he had yesterday, but Chris would not dismiss Talia's words so lightly. Chris turned his head slightly to look at him, and Deucalion caught him at it. He nodded congenially to Chris before turning forward again, and Chris took the opportunity to look at the man standing at his side.

Peter had not spoken beyond a formal greeting when he had joined him at the dais, but despite his distaste for the match itself, he had not deigned to attempt to show that displeasure through lack of respect for the occasion, which would then have been read as lack of respect for their guests. He was dressed as carefully as Chris himself, in a pair of fine breeches which were cut to display the muscular definition of his legs, from his thighs all the way down to where they tucked into boots that were shined so brightly Chris didn't doubt he could see his face in them. His jacket was blue, with silver trim, a subtle yet appreciated ode to Befastia's flag, and an unplanned echo of the blue piping in Chris' own coat. His raven hair was swept back from his face, displaying the sharp cut of his jaw and the lush curve of his upper lip. All in all he was a pleasing picture, one with whom no one, no matter how critical their eye, could find fault for being at the Prince's side. Which was all very well and good for affairs of state, but Chris cared very little for affairs of state in his private life. And if this marriage were anything more than what it was, there were things about Peter that Chris could very much like in his private life.

Peter must have felt his gaze, for he turned his head just a bit toward Chris and raised one brow the fraction of an inch. Chris did not look away, as he had with Deucalion, and the look on Peter's face turned curious.

"Sire." The mildly reproving tone of Deaton's voice called him back to the situation at hand, and he returned his attention to find the Ladies Blake bowing

to them. He had no idea how long they had been there, but it must have been long enough for Deaton to have already announce them, and for Kali to be narrowing her eyes at the insult when she and Jennifer stood. Jennifer's eyes were dark, but he thought he detected a sparkle of amusement as she looked between he and Peter. He could already imagine her leaning at his elbow after the ceremony as she whispered something to the effect of *Decided you liked backgammon after all, my prince?* Jennifer had never given two figs for propriety (hence her marriage to the Lady Kali) and he supposed he should not expect her to begin now.

Chris inclined his head, not acknowledging the awkward break. "Lady Blake. Lady Blake. May I present my betrothed, Lord Peter Hale."

Both women indulged in a blatant examination of Peter before Kali finally nodded to protocol. "Well met, my Lord. The House of the First Estate welcomes you to Befastia."

Before they moved on to their place in the witnesses, Jennifer turned a smile to Allison. "It is good to see you again, Princess. I hope we shall have time to become reacquainted before we depart."

Allison's reply was dignified, as was befitting the occasion, but Chris could see the way she fairly vibrated with excitement. "I hope it as well."

The Ladies Blake moved to their designated spot in the crowd, and with them, ended the procession of nobles. A expectant hush fell over the crowd, and Deaton moved off the dais at the same time Allison and Deucalion shifted to face Peter and Chris. It was unusual, certainly, to have his daughter stand as his best man, but in this thing he did not mind bucking tradition.

She was a vision this evening, a promise of the woman she would soon become. Her dress was silver, from fabric embossed with stars and shot through with blue thread. Her hair was done up in an incredibly intricate set of braids, caught up in loops and held in place with moon shaped hair clips, the symbol of their family. Chris' fingers still ache from the time it had taken to get it perfect. Throughout the procession he had caught the gazes of several young men upon her. He wondered which of them she would eventually choose as her consort, although he already had his suspicions of whom would take the place at her side.

A murmur ran through the crowd, as Bishop Harris appeared at the end of the

aisle and made his stately way to the dais. Although the Church had cut ties with their country many years ago, they still kept many of its rights, and of the small clergy they had amassed, Bishop Harris stood at the top, and served as the personal spiritual adviser to the monarchy. Chris cared little for the man. While Chris was of a serious bent, Harris seemed to exist for little more than to suck all joy from daily life with his dour sermons and his dire promises of hellfire and brimstone. But form must be followed, and a royal wedding required a royal officiant.

Bishop Harris finally reached the dais, his scepter handed off to a junior clergyman, and for the first time since they had entered the room, Peter and Chris turned to fully face one another. Peter had that small, sardonic smile firmly fixed in place but he easily offered his hand to Chris as Harris began to recite the sacrament. There were no gloves, today, and Peter's hand was warm and smooth in Chris' grasp. Chris knew his own hands were rough, covered with calluses from day to day work and war and his distaste at having others do for him what he could do for himself. But he wondered now if Peter found the commonness of his hands offensive, if it was one more thing to support his opinion of Chris' country as rude and backward.

The ceremony was brief, and Chris repeated the words of the sacrament by rote. Peter seemed to do the same, his eyes looking at Chris but not actually seeming to see him. Then Allison was pressing the ring into Chris' palm and he was sliding it onto Peter's fourth finger. He stumbled in the motion, briefly, remembering doing the same with Victoria. Being so much younger and so full of fiery hope. But this ring was simply a plain, though rich, gold band, switched out hurriedly with the ring he had selected when he'd thought he'd be facing Talia, one made with delicate filigree scroll work and inset with three emeralds. He gathered himself and continued, the pause in his motion barely noticeable.

"With this ring, I thee wed." He intoned firmly, pressing briefly against Peter's flesh before withdrawing his hand. "With this ring, I thee defend." There had been some alteration over the years to the traditional wedding vows, to reflect the hard reality of their world.

Peter took his own ring from Deucalion, and Chris offered his hand. Despite having sat in Deucalion's breast pocket, the metal was icy cold as it settled against his skin. The ring was heavy, with a wolf's head cast into the center. Chris had no doubt it had been a part of the Hale line for generations. It did not

escape his notice that by choosing to send Peter, his father had traded the longevity of his family name for the stability of his country. Chris could begrudgingly respect that kind of sacrifice, even as he could sympathize with Peter's anger at being the sacrifice.

"With this ring," Peter said, his voice just as steady as Chris' had been, "I thee accept. With this ring, I thee defend."

Bishop Harris moved his hands in the sign of the cross and blessed the union, then sealed it with a solemn "Until blood ends what God has sealed." When he bent in to press the drops of holy water to their foreheads he whispered into Chris' ear, "This sin will be the downfall of our nation." The look on his face was unchanged when he straightened, lips stuck in their perpetually down turned frown.

Bishop Harris had not been silent in his criticism of the late queen's reform, but had retired his opposition once the law had passed. But this public of a flouting of God's law had apparently been too much for him to swallow without comment. Chris let it wash over him, neither moved nor offended. Bishop Harris might spit and claw, but he stood with the crown when it mattered.

And then it was over. Bishop Harris presented them to the attending crowd and the deed was done. Peter was his husband. It might not have been the plan, but regardless of the actual individual, their ties to Genovia were tightened, their ranks were strengthened, and Chris had to hope that something good could still be built from this.

While most of the crowd would disperse to their homes, the noble families would adjourn to the dining room, where the wedding meal would be held. Allison was already gone, barely waiting for the final words before scrambling off the dais in search of Jennifer and Kali. He was never quite sure how he felt about that unlikely friendship - she certainly picked up bad habits from them, but on the other hand, she had two fierce defenders that would not hesitate to stab a man should he get too close.

He turned to Peter in the shuffle. He felt he should say something, now that the deed was done, but was afraid that anything on the tip of his tongue would lead to Peter lashing out, or open a discussion that would need more time than they had to complete. Anything real would have to wait. Instead, he held out his arm.

“Shall we to dinner?”

Peter looked between his face and his arm for along moment before smiling that same, sardonic smile, and laying his hand lightly upon Chris’ jacketed elbow.

“Lead the way.”

* * * * *

They sat round the table, the soup course set in front of them and the conversation in full swing about. Peter’s posture was stiff as he toyed with his spoon, and Chris did not think the level in his bowl had gone down any in the last few minutes. Even the wine in his glass looked untouched.

Chris frowned, setting down his own spoon. This would not do. He did not need Peter alienated from the people who were now under his jurisdiction, no matter how odious he might find Chris himself at the moment. He studied Peter, trying to ascertain what might be the best strategic move. Although seemingly uninterested in food, Peter *was* interested in the people seated around the table, gaze flitting from person to person as he watched them intently.

Chris waited until Peter caught him staring and then leaned in so that they could speak unhindered.

“Befastia is divided into nine estates,” he began. “Each of the noble houses rules over one of the estates, eight in all.” He gestured to the Ladies Blake, who sat near the far end of the table, Allison situated firmly between. “The Blake house heads the estate closest to the east.”

“Hmm.” Peter picked up his glass and took a small sip. “It seems they did not receive the message about making an appropriate match.”

Chris inclined his head with a small smile. “Lady Jennifer has always made her own road. I believe none of her advisers dared to tell her no.”

“And the other—” Peter trailed off.

“Kali,” Chris filled in. There had been a large number of dignitaries that had been introduced. It would be impossible for Peter to remember them all. “Jennifer met her on a trip to India. Absconded away with her. I understand it

was quite the courtship.”

“How so?”

Chris stifled his smile. It felt something like victory to see he had at least managed to engage Peter’s curiosity. “Their relationship is quite...explosive. The only thing more legendary than their tendency to occasionally try to kill one another is the fierceness of their mutual affection.”

“You jest.” Peter was examining the two women with raised brows.

“Not at all. I’m sure they would be considered quite vulgar by the beau monde, but here we have bigger things to worry about than whether spouses display an unseemly amount of attachment to each other.”

“I somehow doubt their public displays would be the largest complaint general society would have with their relationship,” Peter murmured.

Jennifer must have felt their gaze, because she suddenly broke off from her conversation with Allison and looked up. Her mouth turned up in a merry grin and she lifted her glass to them in a silent toast.

Chris returned the salute, and when he returned his attention to Peter, he was gratified to see he was more engaged with his meal. In the following moments, Chris continued around the table, outlining for Peter each of the families attending, where their districts were, and anything notable or infamous they might be known for. When he finished with the district furthestest south, Peter posited a question.

“You said nine estates. Which is the ninth?”

Chris scooted his bowl and cutlery toward the center of the table so as to clear a space on the tablecloth. He planted one fingertip in front of him and then used the pointer of his other hand to draw a semi-circle at an equi-distance from his fixed point.

“The eight estates are here, more or less divided at equal distance from where we sit. We and the township around us constitute the ninth.”

“And here,” Peter was thoughtful as he placed his finger behind Chris’, tapping

lightly on the cloth, “—is the mountain pass. The palace will be the first attacked should the pass be broken through.”

“Of course. We are responsible for the country’s safety. All defense would gather here, so that those who do not fight would have time to prepare.”

“Most royal families would put themselves as far from danger as possible. Put one of the other estates here, and simply house a garrison.”

Chris shook his head, irritation coloring his words, although they were directed less at Peter and more at the attitudes of the aristocracy. “That is cowardice. How could we expect our citizens to fight and die if we were not willing to do the same? The Argents took an oath when we were raised to the throne. We take that oath seriously.”

Peter did not seem to take offense, just took another drink from his glass and regarded Chris steadily over the rim. “You are a curious sort, you Argents. Most of the continent has forgotten this place even exists.”

It irked him, the way Peter continued to place himself apart. “Shall I remind you, my husband —” he did not stumble, although the word felt utterly foreign to his tongue, “—that you are now an Argent.” He smiled, hoping to soften the unintended roughness that escaped with his words. “And we prefer to be forgotten, as long as the treaty is remembered.”

The meat course came then, interrupting all discourse, and by the time the servants had finished placing the plates, Chris’ attention was claimed by the lord at his immediate left. But as he turned to engage him, he let his fingertips brush across Peter’s knuckles before falling away. It was brief and light enough to be barely worth remarking upon, but deliberate enough so it could not be ignored.

It sat steady on his mind that the time was rapidly approaching where he and Peter must withdraw in order to fully tie the marriage knot. The continent may think his country rude, but he was not so rude a beast as so many of them, to believe that just because there was no affection between he and Peter, that the night must be a pleasureless rut, designed only to meet his needs and desires. His consort deserved more than that, no matter who they were. He had hoped that by the time he and Talia married, they would have developed enough affection that she would have been comfortable enough with him to not instinctively flinch from his touch. He did not have that time with Peter, mostly due to his own

stubbornness from which he could not retreat without losing face, but that did not mean he could not make things as easy for Peter as possible.

He had only a few short hours, but he was old enough and experienced enough to know that anticipation was a powerful weapon. That if he could have Peter become used to his hands in a manner safe from pressure and expectation that it would be far more likely he could find it in himself to respond to Chris when they were away from prying eyes. This - the waiting, the patience, the strategic placement of a touch here or there - was something Chris knew well enough how to carry out. Much like a battle siege, although he reflexively frowned at thinking of his marriage as such, and then had to sooth and assure Lord Emmanuel that he had not found fault in his proposal of a new road between his township and the palace.

The evening progressed in the same manner. When he turned to ask Peter his opinion of a dish, his hand on his elbow. When he signaled a servant for another glass of wine, a brief touch of his fingers to his wrist. When he leaned across the table to ask Lady Calveras' opinion on the growing tension in France, his palm rested against Peter's shoulder. Never threatening, never long, but enough so that Peter could not forget that it was Chris that sat at his side.

By the time dessert was served - both lemon and lingonberry tarts -he knew the exact way Peter's muscles would flex every time Chris touched him.

Finally the last brandy was drank, and Jennifer, ever the one to point out the elephant in the room, cleared her throat. "Your highness, the meal was excellent. All compliments to the cook, as usual. Lords, Ladies. I believe it is time we retire."

There was a general murmur around the table, as their guests threw their compliments and well wishes in with Lady Blake's, and then began to stand, their handmaids and menservants appearing magically at their elbows to lead them to their rooms and attend to any needs.

Peter returned all felicitations graciously, if some what mechanically, but he had not yet moved himself, instead seemed stuck in his chair and staring at the tapestry on the wall opposite. A tapestry which, now that Chris looked, seemed to have developed a small hole in the eye of the unicorn it depicted.

He shot a look at Allison, who pointedly looked away as she skipped out of the

room at her handmaid's heels.

The last guest vacated the room and after a pause, Chris stood, pushed his chair in, and simply waited. After a long moment, Peter picked up his brandy, threw the last dregs back, and stood as well. "Shall we, your highness?"

"You go ahead." He nodded toward the door behind them, the one that led directly to the wing that housed the royal family. "I want to wish Allison a good night. I'll join you shortly." Best to give Peter time to take care of any necessities. Not to mention he still had yet to speak with Allison about his imminent departure.

Peter's twisted half smile was back, but he simply inclined his head before turning on his heel and walking away. "As his highness wishes."

Chris waited until he could no longer hear his footsteps before heading out the door that led to the main hall, knowing he would find Captain Stilinski in his office, planning out the patrols and organizing the troops that would be heading to the gap in the morning. He had one further task before he tucked Allison in.

Captain Stilinski moved to rise when Chris stepped into the room, but Chris waved him back down. "Please, rest easy. I'll only be a moment. There was a soldier that came in with the Hale dowry. A Sergeant Boyd?"

Stilinski did not need to look at his enrollment lists. It was a point of pride with him to quickly know each and every soldier under his care. "Yes. Good arm. Very young, but all of the Hale recruits are young. Which isn't a bad thing. Less bad habits I'll have to train out of them."

"I'd like for you to arrange for him to be moved to my personal guard."

He could see Stilinski had questions, but he did not give them voice. "It will be done by morning." He started to continue, then hesitated.

"What is it?"

Stilinski rearranged several papers in the stack in front of him before speaking. "Sergeant Boyd is very close to another of the Hale soldiers, a Sergeant Lahey. They were raised in the same orphanage before Sergeant Boyd was recruited by the Hale's master at arms. He convinced them to take Sergeant Lahey as well.

I'm...hesitant to separate them so soon after they arrived. It is hard enough for recruits to become accustomed to the clime and the enemy they must fight. To ask them to immediately do so without their usual camaraderie is a thing I try to avoid."

Chris nodded thoughtfully. "I trust to your expertise. Transfer them both. Perhaps assign them to Reyes for their training?"

"My thoughts exactly, sire. Now—" Stilinski looked over the top of his spectacles at him, and Chris felt suddenly judged. "—don't you have a husband to attend to?"

And for all that Stilinski was barely ten years Chris' senior, Chris again had the feeling of being scolded for climbing fruit trees in the courtyard.

"I'll leave you to your work, then, Captain." He resolutely ignored the twinkle in Stilinski's eyes as he withdrew from the room. These were the consequences of the lines that their country had allowed to blur between the classes.

He made his way quickly back to the family wing, and quietly knocked on Allison's door.

Her handmaid answered the door.

"Is she—"

Jill nodded. "She was waiting up for you, sire."

He slipped into the room, to where Allison was sitting up in bed with a book resting open on her lap. He made an exaggerated groan when he saw it. "Again? You tell Scott I'm going to make him deal with your nightmares, rather than poor Jill."

"Father!" Allison glared at him, affronted. "I don't have nightmares!" She pauses, then concedes. "Much."

Chris had nightmares. Nightmares of watching Allison die. Nightmares of his country being overrun. Nightmares of things he'd seen in battle and soldiers he'd had to put out their misery and nightmares of failing in his duty of keeping the tide at bay. There was nothing shameful in the terrors that stalked a man at night.

Better scream at night than fall during the day.

But he said none of this to her daughter. Instead he asked, “How did you see the day?”

A shrug. “I liked seeing Lady Jennifer and Lady Kali. I wish they could stay longer.”

He cleared his throat. “Perhaps, in the spring, you could go visit them for a season.” Jennifer and Kali had been after him to do just that for the last few years, but he had been unwilling to let Allison leave the safety of the palace, had been afraid of losing her after Victoria had given so much to keep her alive. But he could no longer pretend she was not just a few short years into coming into her own and if he kept her wrapped in blankets he was only suffocating her in the end.

Allison sat up straighter, her eyes wide. “Truly?”

He nodded. “Truly.”

She threw herself into his arms and hugged him tightly. “Thank you, Father.”

“Now,” he said, when she had settled back into her pillow, “—what else did you see?”

She considered for a moment. “Lord Hale— Argent is funny.”

“You think he’s amusing?”

“Yes. Very.” Then she frowned. “But also sad. He doesn’t like us. I don’t think he likes it here.”

Chris sighed, but was unable to contradict her observations. “No, I don’t think he does. But he does his duty, as do we all.” He patted her shoulder, because she truly looked sad at Peter’s unhappiness. “Perhaps we can change his mind. He just doesn’t know our country yet. How could he not love it, once he does?”

She nodded, face fairly glowing with anticipation. Because she still saw the hope in things. Still believed the balance of the universe was on the side of good. “Shall we take him to the ice caves, tomorrow? He cannot help but be awed by

those.”

Chris cleared his throat, then took Allison’s hand. “Sweetheart, there’s something we must speak on.”

* * * * *

By the time he finally made it to his rooms, his head was pounding from Allison’s anger and tears. He looked longingly at his bed before cleaning his teeth and splashing his face in the wash basin. The door between his and Peter’s rooms was, as designed, unlocked, and after taking a deep breath, he knocked lightly and then pushed it open.

Peter was looking out the window, his back to him and his hands braced along the sill. But the moment the door clicked closed, he drew the curtains and turned. His hair was ruffled, even back in his queue, as if his hands had been running restlessly through it.

“Well,” he said flatly, “you’re here. Alright then.” He moved briskly, his jacket off and his cravat partway untied before Chris found his voice and held out a hand.

“Stop.” He walked to a small table that held wine and a variety of small treats cook had thoughtfully provided. “Stop.”

Peter huffed a laugh that managed to sound amused and affronted all at the same time. “I know I’m not my sister, Prince, but I have it on good authority I’m not terribly horrid to look at, either.” He pulled his cravat the rest of the way off and threw it on the dresser, but stopped at that.

Chris poured two glasses of wine and held one out. “I’m weary of hearing your sister’s name. Come. Sit.” He gestured to the divan. “Have a drink.”

Peter shrugged and took the proffered glass, then sat across the divan from Chris. “Honestly, sirrah, put the lamps out and you can imagine whomever you like.

“My name, Peter,” he said steadily, “is Chris. And you are the one who is here. I have no need to pretend of anyone else.”

Peter watched him with an inscrutable expression for a long moment before

taking a sip of wine. “Says the man who could not bring himself to enter the bed chamber for more than an hour. Chris.”

Chris chose to ignore the charge rather than engage an argument. Instead he swirled the wine in his glass thoughtfully before turning his attention wholly to Peter.

“I believe you recently toured the continent? What were your thoughts?”

Peter’s sneer belied the lightness of his tone. “That the aristocracy are the same in every country. Bloated on their own self importance and bloodlines and far too comfortable in their divine mandates. Boring and trivial and rotting in their own throne rooms.”

Chris believed he surprised Peter when he sipped from his glass and then nodded. “I saw much the same. The peerage has forgotten their charge is anything more than hedonistic pleasure.”

“Well,” Peter conceded, “I don’t know that I have a complaint against pleasures. Even the hedonistic ones.” His smile was sharp and hot.

“Hmm.” Chris tucked one leg under, his knee bumping against the outside of Peter’s thigh. “But pleasure must be balanced, don’t you think?” He ran his finger around the edge of the glass, watching Peter. “Or how else would one understand it was pleasure at all? Wouldn’t all pleasure then grow dull?”

He abruptly changed the subject. “So you found nothing of worth outside Genovia’s borders then?”

Peter considered the question, his lips pursed as he stared into his glass. “The food,” he said finally. “I liked the food.”

“What was your favorite?”

Peter pondered again, the fingers of his free hand tapping restlessly along the back of the divan. “France. Predictable, I know. But there was a patisserie on a street by the Seine. The madam made this éclair filled with some type of pudding that was just —”

“Les paradis,” Chris broke in. “Les paradis on canal street. They only stay open

until the ten o'clock bell, so most of the peerage do not know they even exist. They feed the servants. But the eclairs — worth the early walk."

Peter's face broke into a wide grin. "Yes! Les paradis. You know it then?"

Chris stared, arrested; it was the first genuine smile he had ever seen on Peter's face. And while Peter had always been handsome, when he smiled— it was nothing short of breathtaking.

Chris ducked his head to regain his balance and then drained his glass of wine. He reached behind himself for the bottle and refilled both he and Peter's glasses before answering. "I know it. Shall I tell you I paid cook a small fortune to learn how to make a passable imitation?"

Peter squinted at him suspiciously. "Do not jest with me, sir. It is too cruel a thing."

Chris threw back his head and laughed, then ran his hand over his face. "Tis no jest. Food is perhaps my hedonistic indulgence.

"The only one, then?"

Chris smiled, brief and thin. "Perhaps not the only one."

Peter rested the base of his glass against his thigh. "You understand, prince, that I am a sure feather in your cap, yes? There is no need to waste polite speech for what must be done."

"My name is Chris," he reminded quietly. The rest of Peter's sentence he ignored in total. "Did you travel to Belgium?" It was outside the usual circuit of most of the peerage's tours, but he was forming the opinion that despite what he wanted him to think, Peter was something else apart.

Peter's smile had been stolen away again by the humorless twisted smirk, but he at least deigned to humor Chris' question. "I did."

"Did you chance upon geroosterd varken in Brussels?"

"I fear the name draws a blank, prin — Christopher."

Chris set his glass carefully down on the floor, then took Peter's free hand and turned it over, palm up. Peter watched him warily, his eyes careful and suspicious, but Chris simply uncurled his fingers until his hand lay flat in Chris'.

"Do you know where Noorden Street crosses Gezegend?"

"Near the red district?"

"Mmm. Yes." He drew his finger in a horizontal line along where Peter's fingers met his palm, then changed direction to continue the line down the side of his hand. "Just so, like this. But there is another street here." He pressed his finger tip back to the center of his original line. "And if you take it west—" He dragged his finger down Peter's palm and up his wrist, pushing his shirt sleeve back as he went. "—you'll find a grimy little inn called geroosterd varken." Peter shivered, goosebumps breaking out against the rough pads of Chris' fingers. He gently set Peter's hand back against his thigh and retrieved his wineglass. "They serve a suckling pig that fair falls off the bone. We'll go sometime when the winter has softened."

There was color set high on Peter's cheeks, either from the wine or from Chris' blatant touch, and Chris let the silence that fell sit and stretch until Peter chose to break it.

"I thought you traveled last on a diplomatic effort. Belgium has no part of the treaty. How was it that you ended there?"

Peter's question had the effect of momentarily derailing Chris from his purpose. "It was mostly diplomatic. But I had another purpose." He leaned in toward Peter, resting his forearm on his knee. "I had read a book by a man from Belgium. He is doing revolutionary things with greenhouses."

The expression on Peter's face made it clear this was the last thing he had expected Chris to say. "Greenhouses."

"Yes! We use them here, at the palace. It would be nigh impossible for us to feed all the mouths we have if we did not. The growing season is too short. And all of the noble heads use them as well." He put his wine down so that he could use his hands to aid in his explanation, his gestures unconsciously becoming more excited as he continued. "But the materials. They are expensive and we've had to import most of them. They're out of reach for anyone but the richest, which

leaves the poor dependent on either the whims of the weather or our largesse with the supplies from treaty families.

“But this biologist...he grows flowers—” Chris held his hands out, as if he were cradling a set of invisible blossoms, “—he has found a new way to build them; cheaper, faster. They can be mass produced for the common man. So I went to see him, to see if he would teach me. Can you imagine, Peter? Every household with their own capacity for a garden in winter? It won’t solve all the hunger, of course not, but how much closer would our people be to true stability?”

He was out of breath by the time he finished, and Peter was again watching him with that inscrutable expression. “And did you? Find him?”

“Yes!” Chris slapped his hands against his thighs. “We are still working to attain all the supplies, but Jennifer and Kali’s district built the first ones over the summer! Now the treaty supplies can be concentrated only on the areas of greatest need! The orphanages, the poor houses!”

For some reason, Peter was smiling again, although a fair bit of amusement lit his eyes as well. “And if I had been here, during these summer months, would I have found you building these things with your own hands? Rather than sending the master carpenters out, as propriety demands you should? Is this why these are so rude and ill kept?” Peter picked up Chris’ hand, the very first time he had touched him of his own accord, and tapped a finger meaningfully against the calluses that marred his soft flesh of his inner palm.

Chris’ own smile died, and he deliberately withdrew his hands from Peter, curling his fingers in as he did so. He straightened proudly, having been until then unaware of how close he had moved toward the other man. “Our hands,” he said coldly, the ice fair dripping from his words, “are ill kept because we fight and we die so that you and all of your ilk can wed and bed and sip your tea, can sleep in soft beds and never once worry that your entrails might be eaten from your stomach while you yet still live.”

“Christopher,” Peter’s voice was urgent, but Chris was in no mood to hear it. “You have misunderstood me. I had no intention of implying —”

Chris cut him off. “You are right, my lord. This is folly. Neither of us need waste polite speech to do what we must.” His motions were curt and contained as he undid his cravat and began to unfasten his cuffs.

Peter's face closed off in an instant. "As the prince wishes." He moved to stand. "Let me get the lamps."

Chris' hand shot out, wrapping around Peter's wrist and jerking him back down. "No. Close your eyes if you must, imagine whichever lover you choose, but I will see my husband. I will see the person I bed."

He could feel the Peter's muscles, drawn tense under his grip, but his voice was light and even when he answered Chris' harsh command. "As before, it is as the prince wishes." Then his eyes hardened, a tiny, mocking smile stretching his mouth. "If the prince would care to release his grasp, I will retire to the bed for his convenience. Tell me, how would you like me arranged? Shall I be on my belly?"

Every word from Peter's mouth stoked Chris' anger higher. Anger at himself, for foolishly baring a part of himself he generally kept closely closeted. Anger at Peter for mocking him. For thinking Chris such an animal that he believed that even in his anger Chris would just *take*. Anger at the fact that, if Talia were to be believed, it was not even the matter of his sex that Peter objected to, but some actual repugnance to Chris himself. Anger that he had thought this could end up any different than it had. Anger that Peter's judgment stung, even a little.

When had Chris' personal feelings ever mattered in the execution of his duties?

He let go of Peter's wrist, only to slide his hand carefully up his arm and then around to cup the back of his neck. Peter's pulse was a pounding rhythm against his thumb, and Chris reflexively stroked across its beat in some inane effort to calm it.

"Here is fine." His voice was soft, in defiance of the maelstrom inside him, and he tugged Peter toward him, until the small space between them was closed.

"What are you doing?" For the first time Peter looked unsure. Slightly panicked.

Chris cupped Peter's cheek with his other hand, feeling the the way his jaw curved against his palm and how it jumped when Peter swallowed. With careful deliberation he swept his thumb across Peter's bottom lip, the plumpness that had drawn his attention for hours.

"I'm touching you," he said simply, then drew Peter to him and kissed him.

Peter inhaled sharp through his nose, a counterpoint to how absolutely still he sat under Chris' touch. Chris liked it better when he had shivered, although the pleasure in that was somewhat soured with the knowledge that it was likely caused by his distaste at the roughness of Chris' hands. Chris kissed him again, moving to the corner of his mouth and then back to its center. Pulled Peter's bottom lip carefully between his own so that he could trace its inner edge with the tip of his tongue. Felt the first minute relaxation in Peter's stiff stance.

He reluctantly let go of Peter's mouth to make the journey to his ear, along the bone of his cheek where a prickle of new beard scratched at his chin. He let the feeling travel through him, let it reach through his anger and tug low in his gut. Let it stoke the desire for Peter that sat there, that had been slowly growing since he had first laid eyes upon him yesterday.

"I will not hurt you," he murmured low into the shell of Peter's ear, all the while carefully exploring the contours of Peter's throat and exposed collarbone with his hands. "If you can believe in nothing else of me, believe that I will not be cruel. You do not have to think of me, you do not have to know these are my hands, but this will be easier for the both of us if you can just let me touch you."

He returned to Peter's mouth, unwilling to see if he was taking Chris at his word, if he had his eyes tightly shut as he imagined some past lover and took his lips. Teased at the corners in a request for entrance and tugged the tie from Peter's hair so that it spilled through his fingers. He knotted the strands around his hand and nudged Peter's head to a better angle. Chris own hair was unfashionably short, cut as a soldier of Befastia's should be.

All at once, the tension in Peter's body disappeared and with a gusting sigh, he opened his to mouth to Chris. He surged forward before he could reign himself back, molding Peter's face into his hands and sweeping his tongue into his mouth. He tasted of wine and a hint of the tooth powder he had cleaned his teeth with and Chris tasted and tasted until suddenly Peter was pushing back, tongue curling around Chris', and hands going to the lapels of Chris' jacket and shoving it off his shoulders. Chris let go only for as long as it took Peter to get the jacket off and toss it carelessly to the floor, and then his hands were back, fingers rapid as the slipped the first button of Peter's shirt, and then the next.

Peter's response was more than Chris could have hoped for, his hands restless and deft as they mapped Chris' shoulders and neck, ran quick and tumble

through his hair. And when something very like a moan escaped as Chris tugged his bottom lip between his teeth, Chris chanced to pull back, to *see*.

Peter looked thoroughly debauched, shirt halfway undone, hair tangled in waves about his face, lips wet and swollen from Chris' ministrations. But Chris was more interested in his eyes. They were heavy lidded, pupils blown wide, but more importantly they were *open*; looking at *him*.

"Christ," Chris groaned, reaching out to push a lock of hair from Peter's face, letting his fingers linger when he was done.

"It's Peter, actually," Peter snarked, "but I can understand the confusion."

Chris barked an unexpected laugh, then ducked his head, finding Peter's throat as his hands returned to their task of undoing buttons. His lips followed after, mouthing down each newly revealed patch of skin, each dusting of whirled hair. He had known Peter's body would be like this, taut and muscled, had known that it wasn't just a trick of his clothes to make it seem so.

He finally completed his task and peeled Peter's shirt from his body, sitting back to examine his handiwork. He had somehow, in his concentration, pushed Peter back until he was half reclined across the divan, Chris hovering over him, and as Chris let his shirt fall to the floor beside the neglected jacket, Peter propped himself up on his elbows and regarded him steadily.

If he had looked debauched before, he looked utterly ravished now, and Chris found his thoughts leaping disobediently ahead to the moment he would look entirely *wrecked*. He reined himself in, concentrating instead on the revelation of Peter's torso, of the blushed pink of his nipples. He wondered how sensitive they were, if Peter would want them toyed with, turned swollen and red from Chris' mouth.

Peter was growing restless under his gaze, left too long while Chris feasted with his eyes but not body, and Chris was uncertain of when he had begun being able to read Peter, but he could fair see that he was about to say something cutting, some attempt to provoke Chris to action or anger. Chris forestalled him, tracing a light path across his abdomen and feeling the tight muscle there twitch and tremble.

"Why would I have need to substitute some fantasy, Peter?" His voice dropped

to a graveled murmur as his eyes drifted, languid and appreciative, over Peter's body stretched out before him. "When there is a masterpiece in front of me?"

He ran a thumb over Peter's nipple, grinning fiercely when it pulled tight and beaded at the touch. Peter's mind might find distaste at the coarseness of his hands, but his body appreciated it nonetheless. He switched to the other nipple, drawing the same response along with a sharp hiss from Peter, and emboldened, he bent low and fitted his mouth over the small patch of flesh, scrapping his teeth across it as he sucked lightly.

Peter jack knifed, a broken, choked off noise escaping, and Chris felt the first press of his erection against his thigh. He made a soothing sound, even as his own cock twitched at the clear evidence of Peter's interest, and used his palms to press Peter's shoulders secure as he continued his attentions.

"Gorgeous," he muttered nonsensically, pulling the tiny nub between his teeth and then soothing the sting with his tongue. "Perfect." He plucked at the other, neglected nipple with his thumbnail, Peter's hands restless across his back as he began twisting fitfully beneath him. Small, shuddering noises were sounding in Chris' ear, a perfect counterpoint to the pounding of the heart against his cheek.

"That's it," he urged, lapping at the clean taste of Peter's flesh, feeling the nub stiffen even further. He worried it between his teeth before switching to the other, hearing the first semblance of a half word slip from Peter's lips.

"Nee-" It was broken off and choked back down; Chris suspected Peter was fighting some battle of his own, some stupidly foolish war against showing too much desire. As reserved as Chris was, he had never understood the popular belief that restraint in the bedroom was a sign of breeding. Somehow, he did not think Peter really did, either. There was too much passion in everything he did, in the very way he *breathed*.

"That's it," he crooned again. "Let go. I knew you would be like this, Peter. Knew you had to be. So responsive." He slid his hands down Peter's arms, across his sides and to his hips, holding them still as he ground his thigh between them. "Feel so good."

"God." Peter's arms were stretched out above his head, his back bowed as he arched up into Chris' touch. His words harshed out between gritted teeth. "Give me *more*."

Chris' lips curved up against Peter's skin. "As my lord wishes." He moved down Peter's body, then off the divan all together, falling to his knees in front of him.

Peter made an abortive grab for him. "You should not —"

"Shhh," Chris quieted, picking up one of Peter's booted feet and resting it against his thigh. If there was one place a prince belonged on his knees it was here, in worship at the altar of his consort's body. He pulled off one boot, and then the other, setting them away before returning to remove Peter's stockings in a similar manner.

Main obstacles removed, he dragged his hands up the outside of Peter's legs, feeling the muscles in his calves and thighs that had been so perfectly hinted at by his breeches. Feeling the shiver that followed the path of his hands.

Here, Chris could lose himself. Could drown out his anger and offense at Peter. Could overwhelm the ever present burdens and responsibilities he lived his days by with the sheer drive to please and be pleased. The need for touch had ever been the twin blade of his life, existed as both his salvation and his downfall. And he had been so long without, been so careful of the lovers he took that he was afraid he might be starving now. He forced himself still for a long moment, until he was sure he could control the sudden savage need to simply bury himself in Peter until he could not breath.

It was Peter's hand in his hair, the slight narrowing of his eyes, that brought him back into himself and spurred him to action. Peter was on a precipice and could easily tip away. Chris would not lose the ground they had gained due to his own weakness.

He continued his leisurely journey across the contours of Peter's legs until he reached his waistcoat. Of that he made quick work, until finally his fingers rested on the fastenings of Peter's breeches. He slid a finger down the buttons, along the bulge made readily apparent and felt as much as heard the hiss Peter made in response.

He waited no longer, making deft work of the flap and tucking his hands in the waistband to tug the breeches off Peter's hips and then off his body all together. And at last, there was Peter, in nothing but his small clothes, with one ankle hooked under the lip of the divan and the other stretched out to bracket one side of Chris' body.

There was a damp spot on the cloth, where Peter's cock was pressed, and Chris was unable to resist leaning in and running his nose up the crease of Peter's thigh. He inhaled deep, a low, rumbling growl emanating from his chest, before sitting back on his heels again.

"You have done this before, I think," Peter gasped out, the light humor just apparent under the effort it took him to speak.

This time it was Chris who smirked, a small, knowing grin as he rested his hands on Peter's thighs and looked up. "Once or twice."

Then he stood, divesting himself of his own waistcoat and boots before holding a hand out. "Come. I would take you to bed." His tone was even, but sure. It was command and request all wrapped into one, and the test lay in whether or not Peter would choose to obey.

Peter's face was flushed and his mouth slightly parted as he regarded Chris through his lashes, but there was only a moment's pause before he set his hand in Chris' and let him pull him to his feet. They stood nearly eye to eye - Peter being only just shorter than Chris - and Peter nodded sharp. "I would have you take me."

The couth, civilized part of Chris - the part of careful, tempting words and slow, teasing touches - vanished the second the words fell from Peter's lips. He yanked Peter to him, chest to chest and hip to hip, and kissed him, careful finesse lost in the taste of his mouth and the heat of his skin.

Peter seemed equally ravenous, eating at Chris mouth while his hands kneaded down his back and then dug into the meat of his posterior. Chris hissed and swore, tangling his fingers in Peter's hair to get a better angle on his mouth as they stumbled clumsily toward the bed. Peter bit at his lip greedily, just as the back of his knees hit the soft edge of the wool stuffed mattress, and they tumbled down, Chris bracing himself on his elbows to keep his weight from entirely blanketing Peter.

Peter's eyes scorched him, both the challenge and the invitation they held calling forth their kindred answer in Chris. Quick as lightening he had Peter's arms pinned over his head with one hand and with the other pulled his small clothes away just enough that his cock sprang free. Chris circled in with his fingers, testing the weight and heat and girth of it.

“Ah!” Peter arched, a smooth, graceful line of muscle, his hips snapping into Chris’ hand as Chris twisted his wrist up and around. Peter’s scent filled his nostrils, strong and musky, with a hint of spice from his cologne, and Chris *wanted*. His chest heaved in time with Peter’s.

“Is this the way you like it? Slow? Drawn out?” He matched his movements to his words, trailed torturous slow up and down Peter’s length. Peter’s eyelids fluttered as his mouth moved around silent words and when the answering writhe of his body threatened to unseat Chris and pull his wrists from his grasp, Chris settled in deeper, tightening his grip in a way he knew would leave red marks that would shame him in the light of day. But for now, he didn’t care, and from the way Peter’s eyes rolled in his head, neither did Peter. “Shhh, it’s okay. I have you. I have you.”

He was burning, ready to mount Peter now, but —

“Or do you prefer fast?” The pace of his hand sped up, working hard and rough now, and his palm was wet with the precursor to Peter’s seed. He knew he could draw him over like this, have him spilling in his hand, but it would be better for Peter if he waited, if he forwent the short term release for the long term pleasure. And Chris was honest enough with himself to admit he wanted to be inside Peter when it happened, to feel him clench and squeeze tight around him as he came.

To that end, he withdrew his hand, watching Peter’s eyes flash back open as if he had been betrayed. “You only,” Chris coaxed low, “have to tell me what you want.”

“What I *want*,” Peter snarled out, disgustingly attractive in his pique, “is for you to get these goddamn clothes off and finish what you’ve started. No one likes a tease, Christopher.”

The corner of Chris mouth turned up. “Oh, I think you like it just fine. But this is a thing I can do.”

He stood and shucked his breeches, then stepped away only long enough to retrieve the bottle of oil from the drawer of the bedside table. He turned back to find that Peter had not waited for him, but had kicked off his small clothes and turned on his stomach.

A small frown marred his face at that. He would have preferred Peter on his

back, so that he could see his face. But perhaps that was too intimate for him, too much like a woman's lovemaking for his comfort. Chris pushed his disappointment away. It was only a small thing, easily ignored in the perfectly cut line of Peter's back and the firm swell of his buttocks. It was a sight he could quickly get used to, should Peter ever deign to open his door again.

Another thing best not thought of, and he pushed it, too, to the side, as he sat on the edge of the bed, facing Peter. He started at Peter's shoulder, then slowly, appreciatively, ran his hand down his spine. Peter stretched like a cat, turning his head to look at Chris. He blatantly took in his nakedness, pausing at Chris cock for a long moment. And as Chris trailed his fingers teasingly down the cleft of Peter's ass, Peter moved without hesitation, reaching a hand out and wrapping it around Chris.

"And you?" he asked with an arch of any eyebrow. "What is it that you like? A fast rut to a quick finish? Or do you stoke the embers for a long night?"

Chris closed his eyes, soaking in the feel of Peter's hand on him, so different from his own touch. Something unwound, deep inside him, that he had not realized was coiled. "I like *this*." He let Peter continue to touch him, held still under his thorough exploration until he could not bear to wait any longer. He wound his fingers with Peter's and then brought his hand to his mouth. He pressed a light kiss to his palm and then released it back to the bed.

There was an air of expectation that gathered heavy around them as he at last returned fully to the bed and settled between Peter's legs. "Christ, you're exquisite," he muttered, canting Peter's hips upward and rubbing slow circles into the globes of his buttocks with his thumbs. Peter made a pleased sort of sound, but nothing more, his head turned to the side and resting on his folded arms. His eyes were closed, eyelashes resting long and full against his cheeks and a part of Chris just wanted to stare, to take the sight in. But most of him wanted to do just as he was, pulling Peter's hips higher until he was on his knees. Spreading him open until he exposed the tight twitch of muscle he would soon sink into.

He ran the pad of his thumb across it and a shiver rippled through Peter. Then, without preamble, he spread him wide, bent his head, and slide his tongue along the same path his thumb had followed. Peter cried out, a sound almost painful in its pleasure, and Chris did not give him a chance to recover before he repeated

the motion again, and again, making Peter wet and soft and pliant and losing himself in the process to the smell and taste of his bedmate.

Peter was docile no longer, scrabbling at the bedsheets as his head hung trembling between his arms. “What is this— What are you—” His voice was almost panicked, like the sensation was so great he couldn’t quite find ground to stand on, and the words kept getting choked off, every time Chris made a pass of his tongue or scrapped his teeth across the madly twitching piece of flesh, or finally, furred his tongue and pressed it firmly inside.

“Tasting you,” Chris finally answered. “Hush.” Then he turned his head and bit sharply into the meat of Peter’s buttocks before returning to his task.

“This isn’t— I don’t—”

Chris pulled back, reaching for the bottle of oil as he spoke. “You are displeased? You would like me to stop?” Gentle amusement threaded through his words. He knew it was not so; the frantic rocking of Peter’s hips to meet his mouth was evidence enough of that. He slicked the fingers of one hand and then drizzled a generous amount over his cock as well. His teeth marks in Peter’s ass had turned deep red and he stroked a palm soothingly over the abused flesh.

“Have you never been touched thus?” It was unimaginable. Peter was no virgin, any more than he was, and to picture a lover so selfish as to deny him this pleasure...

Peter made no answer, just stayed trembling on hands and knees, his shoulders tense and his hips making an occasional abortive twitch as if they were trying to push back to Chris. Chris leaned back in, close enough that when he spoke, his breath ghosted over Peter’s hole.

“Peter...”

He got no further, because Peter’s hands fisted in the sheets, his back arched, and then he rocked back, open and wanting into Chris’ mouth. Chris steadied him with one hand and renewed his ministrations with vigor. This time, he speared his tongue harder inside, furling and flattening it as he began the process of truly working Peter open.

And as for Peter...he seemed to have given up whatever control he had been

using to keep his words locked up. Groans and sighs and little, breathy noises tumbled out unhindered, filtered back to Chris, and urged him on, until his breath was harsh and uneven and both his mouth and Peter were sloppy wet with saliva.

Man or woman, Chris had ever been intoxicated with the taste and essence of his lovers, and he would have been happy to stay here until his jaw ached and locked, until Peter was so overstimulated he would come with just one touch, but tonight could not be that night. And when Peter groaned out a needy '*Christopher*,' Chris hummed an assent into his skin. With Peter thus distracted by the wet of his mouth, Chris finally, *finally* worked a slicked up finger in alongside his tongue.

Peter gasped at the dual sensation of stretch and relief, and his channel immediately clamped down tight and hot around Chris. Chris ran a soothing hand down his flank, then mouthed his way up his spine, continually working his finger as he went. Peter's neck was a sure distraction, and it wasn't until Chris had sucked a dark mark under his ear that he regained enough presence of mind to add another finger to the first.

Peter stiffened at the invasion, then his entire body curled in on itself, sharp, gasping pants of air punching out of him. Chris whispered nonsensical, wordless reassurances, pet his shoulders and sides and pressed biting kisses across his jaw as he scissored and stretched inside Peter to lessen the burn. Christ, but he was *tight*. Chris ached to be in him, had to fight to keep from rutting mindlessly against his hip just to find some relief.

He wrapped a hand around Peter's neglected cock at the same time he worked a third finger in to the hilt and then crooked them up, finally locating the firm bump of flesh he had been seeking.

"*Ahhhh*," The sigh wound out of Peter like so much yarn unraveling, pulled deep from his gut and spilling out of his lips. He went close to boneless, one elbow and the crook of Chris arm about his waist the only things holding him up as Chris repeated the motion, twisting his wrist in time to the thrust and crook of his fingers.

"That's it...so good...perfect...open up for me...so warm inside...want you...want you..." Despite his best efforts he was rutting against Peter, focus lost

again in the touch and the taste and the *smell* of sex that surrounded them.

It was, of course, Peter that brought him back into line. “Please tell me,” he punched out between the thrust and roll of Chris’ hands, “that your cock works as well as that mouth.”

Chris froze, then dropped his head to Peter’s shoulder as a great burst of laughter unexpectedly rolled out of him. Beneath him, Peter was shaking as well, his laughter gasping out to match Chris’. They shook like that for a long moment.

Then quieted.

Then stilled.

Chris nuzzled the back of Peter’s neck. “I hope that you shall find it so.”

He slowly withdrew his fingers. Peter whined at the loss, but before the emptiness could bother him too much, Chris replaced them with the head of his cock. He mourned having to let go of Peter, if only for the moment it took to grip his hips and bring him into alignment. He was drawn incredibly tense for a man who had, for all intense and purposes, ordered Chris to mount him, but as Chris drew his thumb in small circles at the base of Peter’s spine, the tension slowly bled out of him until he was once again as they had started, head turned sideways and rested on folded arms.

Chris pushed in, just a little, and watched as Peter’s eyes clenched shut and his jaw worked soundlessly around tiny pants of air. He withdrew until just the tip of him remained seated, then advanced again. The drag and pull of Peter’s body made him drunk. Made him want to drown in the heat of it until he came hard and messy and marked Peter from the inside out. He grit his teeth against the impulse, at least for the moment, and repeated the motion, working his way in tiny increments into Peter until, after what seemed a forever kind of torture, his hips drew flush against Peter’s buttocks.

He watched Peter’s face. Watched as it slowly relaxed. Watched as the tenseness in his jaw was replaced by a flush of color high on his cheeks, and his lashes began to flutter instead of clench. Peter’s tongue swept out to wet his bottom lip and then he stated hoarsely, “I am well.”

Still Chris did not move. Instead he palmed his way up the curve of Peter’s back,

a thing to which he was becoming addicted, then blanketed him so that they were pressed as skin to skin and interlocked as possible. His mouth was again at Peter's ear and he whispered in it softly.

"Peter Argent, née Hale, Prince Consort of the house of Argent, with this body, I thee wed."

Only then did he lift Peter to his elbows as he again withdrew almost his full length, dig fingers into his hip deep enough to leave imprints of his passage, and then give into the lust that crawled and slithered through his veins.

The first snap of his hips was violent enough to move them up the bed, but he did not stop and Peter did not call foul. The second snap was met by the answering thrust of Peter's pelvis, as he braced on his hands and rocked back just as violently. Chris bared his teeth and got a hand on Peter's cock and after that there was little comprehensible beyond the pull and thrust of their bodies, beyond the biting bruise Chris left on Peter's shoulder as he pinned him down and worked his cock and prostate until Peter was cursing and shaking and sobbing, beyond the rough, open kiss Peter pulled him into as their movements started to stutter out of rhythm and control.

Chris sat back on his heels and pulled Peter with him, forcing his thighs wide enough that he would feel the ache in the days to come. And as he continued to thrust up into him, directing Peter's motion with one hand and stroking him fast and rough with the other, he hoped he would. Hoped that when Chris was miles away Peter would feel that burn and remember that not everything in Befastia was made to despise.

Chris' orgasm was gathering low in his belly, spurred on by the rippling clench of Peter's channel and the low, needy sounds pitching from Peter's lips. In his hand, Peter's cock pulsed and hardened further, and in a final bid, Chris twisted his palm over Peter's tip at the same time he tangled Peter's hair in his fist and bit the nape of his neck.

Peter cried out as he came, warmth spilling out over Chris' hand and Peter squeezing so tight about him that Chris' breath caught short. As much as he'd known it was coming, his orgasm punched out of him before Peter was even finished. He fell forward with a guttural shout, tumbling Peter over with him until they lay in a sweaty, panting heap.

* * * * *

He brushed Peter's hair from his face, aware they had made enough mess of the sheets that the servants would immediately know what had happened here. And what the servants knew, the kingdom knew, with but few exceptions. There would be no doubt the marriage had been sealed.

He waited until the frantic pounding of their hearts slowed to safer speeds before unplastering himself from Peter's back and rolling to sit at the edge of the bed. "Wait a moment," he instructed Peter.

He rose and walked to the washbasin, and dampened one of the hand clothes folded neatly beside it. The water was not as warm as he would have liked, even with the small stove of embers banked beneath it, but it would have to do.

He rinsed himself off and then returned to Peter, carefully cleaning away the sweat and the seed from his body. Throughout all of it, Peter said nothing, other than a few appreciative groans when Chris found an especially sensitive spot. Chris paid close attention to the places he had marked Peter with his mouth, making sure there was no broken skin that would need to immediately be seen to. Infection set in too rapidly to take such things lightly.

Finally, though, he was done. Peter had not asked him to stay and he had no excuse to linger. He and Victoria had rarely spent a night apart, but he knew that type of arrangement was frowned on by the *ton*, even if Peter had borne him any real affection. After a moment's hesitation, he pressed his lips to Peter's shoulder, who was watching him with a neutral, blanketed expression.

"We will consider this duty done. You have my word." He inclined his head. "The room is yours, inviolate."

Peter's expression grew cool, and what remaining peace Chris had hoped he had somehow built in the last hour disappeared. Not that Chris had believed a rut they were more or less *compelled* to perform would magically transform Peter's feelings on him or his country. He would be foolish to confuse the seduction of Peter's body with the seduction of his mind.

"Our duty done." Peter's voice was without tone. "Well, that certainly is a relief, is it not, prince."

Chris did not have an answer to that, so he instead pulled the sheet up over Peter's body to keep the chill from setting in and stood, aware of both his nakedness and the fact he had more dignity than to walk about the room gathering clothes when he should be gone. The maids would separate things to their proper place tomorrow.

"Rest well. I shall have the servants bring up some extra water bottles. It will become much colder before morning."

Then he left the room and closed the door behind him.

Chapter 4

Peter woke, buried to his nose in a pile of blankets he did not remember fetching, although he well remembers the servant appearing unobtrusively within moments of him wrapping his dressing robe about him in the wake of the prince's grim exit. The man's carefully averted eyes had not deterred him in his task of tucking several hot water bottles at the bottom of the bed clothes, then bowing and disappearing as quickly as he'd come.

The prince, it seemed, kept his word to the very letter. Peter frowned sourly at that, petulantly turning to his side with a huff that was wasted on an empty room. The blankets, though welcome, had not been part of that late night delivery, and coupled with the fact both his and Chris' clothes had vanished from their messy piles across the floor, Peter was forced to conclude some intrepid servant had crept in while he yet still slumbered. While it was not unusual for servants of the household to come and go as such, as if they truly *were* invisible or not worth the announcement or notice, Peter *hated* it. It had always made his skin crawl in ways he could not fully explain, to be so vulnerable. That he had slept through it at all was testament to his exhaustion.

The light streaming through the window was strange. Too blinding, and yet somehow weak. The curiosity of it drew Peter from the warm cocoon of his bed to investigate, grateful of the thick rugs that covered almost the entirety of the floors. When he took his first step, he grimaced, the ache in his body catching him unawares. He gingerly took another step, and then another, each movement tentative as he worked out the bruising soreness in his thighs and shoulders and buttocks that was somehow not as unpleasant as it should be. It was foreign, and new.

Among the places and men he had found license to explore his own particular desires, he had never crossed anyone who could even have conceived of the possibility of mounting a member of the peerage. Would not have even considered the idea that someone of Peter's class would have allowed it. Would have *wanted* it. *Peter* had not even considered wanting anything more than to lose himself in whatever man was beneath him.

After last night, he was very much considering it, although he could not be sure if the intensity of the experience was as much due to the act of being rutted as it

was to the man doing the rutting. He touched the deep bruise on his left buttock, and the hiss of pain brought a flashing remembrance of Chris between his thighs, of Chris licking him open. He flushed deep red, both at the echo of pleasure that dug low in his stomach and at the wave of embarrassment that swept over him at how easily he had given in to the prince's urgings.

Stupid, insufferable man. Peter thought he could have held out, could have kept himself apart as they carried out the act Chris clearly saw as little more than an obligation to be gotten through, if it hadn't been for the man's *voice*. As ramrod stiff and imperious as he was during the day, the moment he had stepped into Peter's room something had *changed*. His voice had become sin wrapped in velvet, and every fiber of Peter's being had wanted to do nothing more than follow wherever it led.

And Chris had desired him, at least for that short time. Had seen Peter and approved and *wanted*. Peter was sure of that if nothing else, and he hated the way a part of him basked in that approval. Had *wanted* that praise. Had twisted and writhed and gagged for it, like some sick and starving dog.

More than that, he hated the way Chris had touched him as if he *mattered*, and then just as quickly reduced him back to nothing more than bartered chattel.

Peter shook his head angrily to clear it, suddenly aware he had stopped dead in the middle of his trek to the window. No matter. He was used to carving his space in places not his own, in building his own bits of power as needed.

He reached the window and groaned. Snow was falling heavily, and if the amount of it blanketing everything in sight was any indication, it had been doing so for some time. He had rarely encountered snow before his trek here, and never snow like this. It was suffocating, the realization that even if escape had been a viable possibility, it was one he could never avail himself of and survive. He had never been without an escape route, at least not until recently.

His belly rumbled, reminding him it had been hours since he last ate, and he pulled his dressing robe on before making his way out of the bed chamber and to his sitting room. As he had hoped, some thoughtful soul had left a still steaming carafe of coffee at the small breakfast table, beside a covered platter that hopefully held something of substance. There was an envelope as well, with his name scrawled on the front in a broad, neat hand, but he put it to the side in lieu

of exploring the possibilities of the platter.

He lifted the top away, then blinked, staring at the contents. A small plate of eclairs looked back at him, shored up on the sides by several slabs of salted meat and a hard boiled egg.

...Shall I tell you I paid cook a small fortune to learn how to make a passable imitation?...

It suddenly occurred to him who must have been behind the delivery of blankets as well, although he had no doubt it hadn't been Chris who brought them. Chris had said he would not return to Peter's rooms and Peter was certain he would not break that word.

The man was entirely incomprehensible.

He took a bite of (*delectable, delicious, light as air he was going to have to win cook to his good side*) eclair and then broke open the envelope. It was, as he suspected, penned by Chris. Somehow it made sense he would write it himself, rather than employ the use of a scribe as so many of the nobility did. He smoothed the paper flat on the table and read.

Peter -

I thought that you might prefer to lay abed this morning. Cook was convinced by your enjoyment of her supper dishes to prepare the eclairs we spoke of last night. I hope they may in some small way make up for my behavior. Please accept my apologies for my anger last night. It was unjust of me to expect that you, so recently plucked from the center of Society, should not be offended by the rude realities of my country. I know this was not of your choosing. We are both, it seems, bound by family and honor.

Peter rolled his eyes. Perhaps he had not chosen his words as carefully as he should have, but if the idiot man had actually *listened* to what Peter had been trying to say he would have quickly understood Peter had only meant to comment upon the remarkable nature of Chris' actions, not criticize them. As to the rest of his observation... Peter was fairly certain their ideas of honor were not nearly the same.

I could not expect you to immediately love my home as I do, but as it is now your

home as well, I hope that you might at least come to know it and perhaps eventually appreciate its unique beauty.

We begin deployment of troops to the mountain pass today, and as is tradition I will join the first wave of soldiers. Forgive me for not waking you before I go, but I thought you would prefer the sleep. Mayhap without my rudeness to color the view, you will see our home in a little better light.

Well. That was not quite as he had expected. Wedded, bedded and left, all in the space of twenty four hours. He really was living out a penny dreadful. He sniffed and ate another éclair before continuing.

The staff will obey you as they would obey me. Which means only when it really matters and otherwise just as they see fit.

Peter could picture the tiny, amused smile that Chris would have worn when he'd written that. The man seemed to actually prefer the familiar way the servants treated him, contrary to the strict protocol Chris himself observed.

I would implore you again to remember our staff are not to blame for the predicament in which we find ourselves. They do not deserve to be mistreated for something in which they have no hand.

The man acted like Peter would take his frustrations out on innocent bystanders. Which, well, that did sound like him, so he might have a point.

I regret I will not be the one to introduce you to the wonders of our fair estate, but Allison is a grand tour guide, should you be able to convince her to fill in. Perhaps when we next meet, it will be with a kinder eye.

Your husband,

Christopher Nicholas Argent

He put the letter away and turned to his meal in earnest. He turned the words over and again in his mind, picking apart what meaning might lie behind what was said, and perhaps more importantly, what was not said. It was something of an enigma, this letter, but it was to be expected, given how most of his knowledge of the prince came second hand through Talia, and even she did not know him well.

When he had breakfasted, he rang for his manservant to assist in his dress. He ended up with too many layers than was strictly fashionable, but he couldn't quite shake the chill in the air, despite the brazier in his room and the warmth somehow being piped through vents in the floor. He was uncertain his wardrobe was equal to the task of Befastia's winter.

His cravat, though, was perfectly arranged, and thus armed against the day, he ventured from his room to see what he could find.

* * * * *

He stumbled upon Allison almost immediately, leaning dangerously over the railing that overlooked the main common area of the wing. A dark skinned woman he had yet to meet was beside her, talking quietly, with small, contained gestures. She was not in the long list of nobles he had been introduced to yesterday, so she was likely not in the peerage, but she was dressed finely enough that he immediately placed her station somewhere near the mysterious Deaton he'd only caught glimpses of - someone not technically titled, but accorded the same respect nonetheless. There seemed to be many such people attached to Chris' household.

His household now, he supposed.

He cleared his throat and Allison dropped back down to the floor.

"Good morning, Pri —"

"I *hate* you," she spit out, her glare full of vitriol.

It wasn't nearly the first time he'd heard the sentiment, but he admitted this one stung, coming as it did from the one person he'd thought he'd brokered a good natured truce with yesterday.

"Well," he said lightly, "you're certainly not alone. But I don't suppose you'd care to share exactly what I've done to earn the honor?"

"He was going to *stay*." Her small hands were clenched at her side. "He never stays, but he was going to stay this time. And then *you* came instead of Lady Talia and then Father said he thought you might love us better if he were not here. One winter he's going to *die*, and if it is this time it will be *your fault*

because you hated him so much!” She suddenly looked worn out and old beyond her years, like someone who had far too much knowledge at far too young an age.

“That’s ridiculous,” he snapped out, because it was ridiculous, was it not? “I doubt very much the prince gives two figs about the state of my happen—”

He was cut off by the excruciatingly painful experience that was the pointed toe of Allison’s boot coming into sharp contact with his shin. He hissed and hopped and looked reproachfully at Allison’s companion.

“Should you not be doing something here?”

She raised an imperious eyebrow. “My job is to teach the princess the things she should know as Queen. And sometimes that involves knowing when a well aimed assault is warranted.”

Not an ally then, this one. “And you are?”

“Marin Deaton.” Then as almost an afterthought, although not one that seemed deliberately insulting, “Your majesty.”

That was new, and caught him off guard, for all that he logically understood that marrying a prince raised him to a similar status, at least in name. Technically he ranked above his parents now. There was a great deal of satisfaction to be had in that.

Then her words caught up with him. “Deaton? Are you then wed to —”

She shook her head. “My brother.”

“What exactly is it that he does?”

She shrugged casually. “A bit of this and that.”

Peter knew what that meant. “The spy master then.”

He thought he might have surprised her, because she blinked before answering. “Something of that sort.”

Allison had obviously tired of their conversation, because she broke back in with her original pique still firmly in place. “You’re wrong.”

“You’ll have to remind me about which thing.”

“My father.” Her jaw was hard in a passably good imitation of said man. “He does care about your happiness. He cares about *everyone’s* happiness. Even if it means he neglects his own. Or gives in when Gerard —”

“Allison,” Marin cut in with a firm reprimand. “Respect.”

Allison whirled on her. “Grandfather doesn’t deserve respect. I’m *glad* he’s dead! I wish he had died sooner!”

Peter took stock of that. Even Talia hadn’t known much about Gerard Argent, other than his reputation as a hard, unyielding man who had stepped into leadership when his wife had died after a long, protracted illness. His disappearance had been confirmed in the missive carrying Chris’ request, but Talia had felt sure he was still the force behind it. The fact that Chris had refused to step into the title of King had led Peter to assume they still held out hope he might be recovered yet.

He would know more about this, as well as the anger Allison held for her grandfather, but due to the stern look on Marin’s face, he made the judicious decision to change the subject. Allison could be approached later, when she was away from tempering ears.

“But back to the matter at hand,” he said, “as your father neither discussed nor asked my opinion on his assumptions, I refuse to accept the blame for them.” In fact, he felt oddly more groundless and lost with the knowledge Chris was gone than he had when he had first stepped foot from the carriage into the courtyard. He supposed it was only natural, as he was the only person he knew besides Deucalion in this godforsaken place, and Deucalion’s presence was even less comfort.

“However,” he smiled charmingly at Allison and was unsurprised to see it made just as little of an impression as his insults of yesterday had, “he is correct that I should better know my new home.” Knowledge, after all, was power. And power would keep him safe. “He did mention you might be willing to do me the honor of a tour? Perhaps after lunch?”

And because he was genuinely curious to know if he'd guessed right about the level of Chris' involvement in the project, he prodded. "Would you show me where your father builds his greenhouses?"

* * * * *

He had yet to unearth Deucalion, although he suspicioned he would be found nearest a warm fire and a decanter of brandy, and since he would not have his tour guide until the afternoon, he took it upon himself to begin his own exploration. The family quarters were fairly as expected; not really rich enough to be considered a palace proper on the continent, but far finer than he would have expected on his journey here. The decorations were understated as opposed to any kind of ostentatious display of family wealth, but anyone with an eye would quickly see they were of the highest quality. It was an interesting cross between utilitarianism and beauty, and when he had made his way round the entire floor, he had to concede it was well done.

He noted over half of the suites were unoccupied. The Argent family was dwindling it seemed. Chris' marriage to him certainly wasn't helping that, and he was again baffled as to exactly why the match had not been rejected outright. If Allison died - and he the idea bothered him, if only just - the Argent line would pass from history completely. It just didn't make *sense*. Unless of course Chris had a bastard hidden away somewhere against just a need. Or perhaps he still planned to sire one. Peter's stomach soured at the blunt reality that that could likely be the case. Fidelity was certainly never a requirement of a marriage, as long as all involved were discreet. Peter had no doubt Chris could be very discreet.

For all he knew Chris already had a long term mistress. Or back door gentleman as the case may be. It would make sense for a man widowed as long as he.

He pushed the thought from his mind and found he had somehow wandered into the guest wing. He stopped in front of an especially imposing portrait of Chris' late wife. In it, her hair was sheered just as unfashionably short as his. More so, Peter supposed, since she was a woman. There was a look in her eyes that made him think she could stab someone and then go directly into organizing a collection for charity. He couldn't decide if she was pretty, or merely handsome, and he wondered what it was about her that had so caught Chris' eye. The match was not arranged, that was the one thing he knew for sure.

“Scary, isn’t she?”

Somehow Lady Blake (the Kali half) had appeared beside him. Her tone of voice was frankly admiring, making it clear she did not think the adjective was a negative one.

“She looked well suited to rule,” he answered carefully. He was not so foolish as to say anything that might be taken as criticism of Chris’ late wife.

“She was. At least as far as I know.” At Peter’s look she expounded. “It was before I came, so I only know it second hand. And even Jennifer was barely more than a child when she died, so her memories are colored by age.”

“She seems very...stern.” He observed delicately.

Kali’s smile was mildly amused. “She was a fierce warrior. That is how they met, you know. Fighting at the mountain pass. She was newly enlisted, from the second district. They say he saw her decapitate one of the Undead with a single blow, and his heart was lost.” Her smile grew mischievous. “They say their passion was so great they did not wait for the wedding, or even proper banns. It was quite the scandal.”

He snorted. “That does not sound very much like the prince.” He could not even picture it.

She inclined her head. “No, it does not. But Jennifer says he was different then. It was before his mother fell ill. Before the King gained so much power. He was barely eighteen. Still more untamed boy than man. Still carrying the belief that his own desires could co-exist with his duty...with his *love* for this country. His fights with the king then are the stuff of legends.” Her smile faded. “After his mother’s death he did not fight so much anymore. And after Victoria’s death, not at all.” She cleared her throat and turned back to the picture. “They say Victoria’s death changed him. That if it had not been for Allison he would have followed after.”

“Why are you telling me this?” It was a huge breach of etiquette, to share such personal gossip with a virtual stranger, and beyond that, neither of the Ladies Blake seemed the gossiping type.

Her eyes turned hard. “Victoria, the people admired. Respected. Now practically

worship, to Bishop Harris' dismay. The Prince? They *loved*. Still love. He has stood between them and the king's fist for many years. So have a care how you treat him. As you said, we are barely civilized."

"You're threatening me." He said it flatly, because he found it best to call a spade a spade. That Chris could inspire such loyalty was not as surprising as it would have been yesterday, though.

A musical laugh came from behind him and he turned to find Jennifer gliding toward them. For all she walked with perfect grace and decorum, she projected danger with every step. She passed him, circling around until she was standing with her wife.

"My Lady would never threaten." Her smile was sweet. "Only the weak make threats." Standing side by side, it would be easy to judge Kali as the greater threat, because her face was almost always grim, her smiles little more than twitches of the lips, while Jennifer looked close to a debutante at her first coming out, all demure smiles and shy. But it was illusion, and if there was one thing Peter knew about, it was the judicial use of masks.

"My lady simply states the truth of things."

"I'm curious." He tapped his lip with one finger thoughtfully. "What would the prince say if he knew we were having this conversation?"

"Oh," Jennifer moued while Kali's look shifted minutely to what he would label as 'amused,' "I'm sure he would be horrified at the behavior of his subjects. And we would feel terribly ashamed to have disappointed him."

"Terribly," Kali echoed.

Jennifer dropped the facade so quickly Peter almost took a step back in spite of himself. "The prince is too kind. He should not have accepted the match so easily. Dishonor should not be met with honor."

Peter raised a hand, conceding the point. "What, exactly, do you think I plan to do? I am a stranger in a strange land. Surrounded by people that, as you have so eloquently pointed out, do not want me. It would seem singularly unwise to attempt to eliminate the one person - two I suppose if you count the princess, which I'm not sure you should - that guarantees my safety."

“We have not yet decided if you *are* wise, prince consort. And there are a myriad of ways you could hurt the prince with the power you now hold. Not all pain is physical.” He wanted to laugh at that, at the idea he had any sort of power just because of some hastily spoken wedding vows, but he refrained as Kali continued. “One more thing, *sire*. Make Allison cry again, and I will unman you.”

He again refrained from pointing out it was not *his* fault the chit cried. “Was I misinformed about the date of your departure? Do you not have an estate to manage?”

“Why, prince! One would think you are eager to see us leave.”

“One does not need to think,” he deadpanned. “One could know that for sure.”

He was not certain, but he thought Kali was smothering a smile. “We have decided to linger a bit longer.”

“While I am certainly overjoyed at the prospect of even more of your company, do you not feel compelled to return home?”

Jennifer waved her hand airily. “The supplies can travel without us. And Ennis serves well in our stead. They will survive without us for a short spell.”

He hoped all the sarcasm he intended was carried in his short, sharp bow. “It seems then the matter is settled. I look forward to deepening our acquaintance.”

Jennifer and Kali curtsied simultaneously. “The feeling is entirely mutual.”

He waited until they had disappeared toward the common areas before turning back to Victoria’s portrait. “Majesty, you have left me quite a mess.” He stayed there for the better part of an hour, trying to put together the pieces in a still incomplete puzzle.

* * * * *

After his heartfelt tete-a-tete with Victoria’s painting, he ended up at the entrance to the west wing. Because that little incident from yesterday was still eating at his brain. And he wasn’t satisfied with Allison’s explanation.

The wing was, from, all appearances, exactly as described. Empty. Unlit. Dusty. There were half packed crates lining the walls, and the temperature was notably cooler here than the rest of the palace. He shivered, reminded again of the failure of his wardrobe. He picked halfheartedly through a few of the crates, finding vases and portraits of long dead Argent family members. Several of them bore a strong resemblance to Chris.

Bored, he moved on, and was halfway up the staircase when he whirled, hand going to the knife tucked into his waistcoat and bringing it up at the ready. He relaxed minutely when he recognized Captain Stilinski at the bottom of the staircase. But only minutely.

Stilinski looked between the knife and his face, then gave a small nod. "It's good you take steps to protect yourself, sire. The prince will worry less now."

Peter's eyebrows sprang to the top of his forehead. "Have you been following me?"

"Follow is a strong word. One more associated with our Mr. Deaton than with the Captain of the Guard."

Peter regarded him steadily, refusing to back down. Again, Stilinski nodded, as if something Peter had done pleased him.

"The prince was most emphatic that you be kept safe."

"So you *have* been skulking about." Likely making reports as well. It stings.

"I do not skulk. Nor do any of your guard. We are simply unobtrusive."

Peter tilted his head to the side. "*My guard.*" The sting expanded. It was not that he was unused to being mistrusted; it was more that Talia had told him this could be a new start. And he had *believed* her. Foolish.

He did not think Stilinski could read minds, but perhaps he was wrong, because the man took a step forward and held up a cautioning hand. "Your *personal* guard. The same as the prince has a personal guard. He would never do you the insult of giving you less." The sting lessened.

"Then why remain in the shadows?"

A chagrined look crossed the captain's face, but was gone so quickly he could almost believe he imagined it. "The prince's preference. He did not think you would...accept the gesture."

"Then why reveal yourself? A bit defiant don't you think?"

Stilinski's grin was wry. "Two reasons, prince consort. One, I do not like 'skulking.' There is a reason I work *with* Deaton not for him. I prefer to face obstacles head on. And two, I wanted to know if you were as defenseless as you seem to want us to believe. I am pleased you are not."

"Does everyone here do just as they please? Do the prince's orders count for nothing?"

Stilinski's face became deadly serious. "The prince's orders count for *everything*. The prince and the future queen are *everything*. As now are *you*. But we do not confuse blind obedience for loyalty. And neither does the prince. The price appreciates subjects who think."

"The prince." Peter sheathed his knife as Stilinski climbed the remainder of the stairs between them. "Did the King appreciate this quality as well?"

Stilinski's face darkened, giving Peter his answer before he even spoke. "The Queen raised her son well."

"Ah." He continued his trek up the stairs, Stilinski keeping pace. "Is it really so unsafe within the very palace walls? That I should require a guard?" His voice echoed off the emptiness of the corridor.

Stilinski tucked his hands behind his back. "The prince rarely utilizes his guard within the palace. At least not on a constant basis. If he were here, I do not believe he would find yours so urgent. But he worries. You must understand that the prince takes his responsibilities very seriously. If you ever hope to understand *him*, you must understand that."

"Yes," Peter acknowledged sourly, "I am well aware he considers me part of his burden."

Stilinski shook his head, an irritated noise coming from the back of his throat. "Do you think he considers his daughter a burden?"

Peter thought of the softening of Chris' face every time Allison was in the room, the fondness in his voice whenever he mentioned her. "Of course not."

"Of course not," Stilinski echoed. "And yet he has made sure she could defend herself from almost the time she could walk. Has eyes on her even *when* he is here. Her governess was picked as much for her ability to kill as for her ability to teach. He protects what he cares about, prince consort. You should not take it so bitter that that now includes you."

Peter could think of one hundred arguments to counter his rather simplistic statement, chiefly that there was a difference between duty and caring, and having been the recipient of mainly the first his entire life, he was well qualified to delineate said difference. In the end he deferred, due to the fact it would be an utter waste of words, and there was not any point to the debate.

"But you never answered. Are we truly unsafe here?"

Captain Stilinski considered before answering. "A breach of the pass is rare these days. A true siege of the palace even more so." Then he looked at Peter. "The last was the occasion of Victoria Argent's death."

"Ah." Another piece of the puzzle fitted itself to the whole. And on that topic there seemed little more to say. They'd made an entire circuit of the upper floor before he voiced what was next on his mind.

"Mr. Finstock mentioned a disturbance here yesterday that you were privy to? I admit it made me curious. Especially considering the abandoned state of the wing."

There was barely a pause in Stilinski's steps. "I'm afraid it was nothing as exciting as that. Two soldiers fell into a row that nearly escalated to weapons. The matter was easily put down, though."

"And that required the presence of the prince? That seems...unusual." He could not imagine his father taking the time to personally address a grievance of the men under him. That was what the steward was for. Or in this case, Stilinski.

"Normally, no." Stilinski led the way back down the stairs and then through a doorway that opened to a grand ballroom. He could imagine what it must have looked like, all lit up and filled to overflowing, in an age before the family had

dwindled. Now it was dark, and dusty, and the mirrors along the wall only reflected their own visage back. He walked slowly around the border, taking in the intricately carved woodwork as Stilinski continued. It was a shame to waste this space. He wondered if he could convince Chris to reopen it.

“But one of the men involved is related to a minor noble on the continent. Some delicacy must be involved in the handing out of consequences.”

It sounded sensible, and neither Stilinski’s gaze nor his expression faltered as he recounted it. But something was off and it bothered him he could not put his finger on it.

“Were they sent to cool their heels in the brig then?”

Stilinski shook his head. “No, sent to the pass before schedule. A double deployment will cool heads and leave little time to indulge personal feuds.”

All neatly wrapped up, then. Convenient.

By then they had covered the entire wing and found themselves back in the entry way. “Was there something else you wished to see, your majesty?”

“It’s Peter,” he said absently. “And no. I should probably find my uncle.” He had spent most of his life bitterly wanting the title he knew would somehow find a way to his sister and yet hearing this one sat strange and wrong. Especially here, where titles seemed to matter far less than the strength of one’s arm. The very idea of it would scandalize everyone in his social circle.

Stilinski smile was perfunctory, as if his mind were already on to the next task. “I believe he is in the family dining room. Lunch.”

He supposed it was no surprise the Captain of the Guard would know all the residents’ locations. The mention of lunch reminded his stomach he had only had a light breakfast, and that several hours ago.

“I shall join him then.” He walked several steps before he realized Captain Stilinski had not yet moved. “Letting me walk alone? Rather risky, don’t you think?”

Stilinski’s smile turned more genuine then. “I think we can risk it. The guard will

be around.”

“But unobtrusive.”

Stilinski inclined his head. “But unobtrusive. Come out to the barracks should you find time. I’d like to try your sword arm.”

“I shall make a point of it, Captain.”

“If I might offer a word of advice?”

Peter raised an eyebrow. “Wasn’t that the point of this entire exercise?”

“Only in part.”

Peter was tempted to ask what constituted the other parts, but decided against it. “Then you may.”

Stilinski offered a small bow. “Keep the title until we have earned the first name. People should remember where it is you sit until you can afford for them to forget it.”

An equal measure of pistol and olive branch then. “Did the king ever forget his?”

Stilinski’s smile was cool. “No.”

Peter inclined his head. “I shall see you at the barracks then.”

“Until then.”

When Peter looked back from the hallway leading to the family rooms, Captain Stilinski had yet to move from his post at the entrance to the west wing.

* * * * *

Peter’s fork scraped discordantly over his plate as he and Deucalion regarded each other over the small dining table in the family room. Deucalion took a delicate sip of tea - more than likely spiked with a tippler of whiskey - before finally speaking.

“Well, you certainly let him mark you up like a bitch in heat, didn’t you? I would

have expected better from you.”

Peter was suddenly reminded anew of all the small aches in his body, as well as the fact that his cravat must have slipped from where he had had his man carefully tie it so as to cover the love bite he had discovered in the mirror this morning. But he kept his expression bland and resisted the urge to put his hand to it to check. One did what one could to keep from giving Deucalion any victories.

“And what, pray tell, uncle, would that be? Should I have fought? Resisted his advances? Lain limpid and blushing like a woman? He has the right and the law to do however he pleases! Is this not what you repeated to me over and over again on our journey here?”

“True.” Deucalion’s expression took on a note of feigned sympathy toward Peter, but the distaste dripping from his words was entirely real. “I suppose we should have known he’d be so base. These people really are quite common, aren’t they?”

Peter was unsure where the spike of irritation came from, but it burned bright and pushed out through his mouth. “These people are *my* people now, uncle. So have a care with how you speak of them. I won’t have them insulted.”

“Well, well, well.” Deucalion’s amused smile turned nasty. “He really did tumble you well, didn’t he? At least now we know the secret to keeping you in line.”

Before Peter could retort, a throat cleared at the door. Just as yesterday, Mr. Finstock had managed to discreetly appear at the door without notice. Unlike yesterday, his hair was in a monstrous disarray about his head, and he was glaring at Deucalion with a wide eyed stare that spoke a number of impolite things.

“Mr. Finstock?” Peter called to the man. As soon as his attention turned from Deucalion to Peter, his expression smoothed out to congenial politeness.

“Forgive my intrusion, your *highness* —” here Finstock darted another look at Deucalion before continuing, “—but the tailor is here.”

“The...tailor?” Peter was at a loss.

Finstock sighed and shook his head, and Peter could almost swear he *rolled* his eyes. “The prince did not think to mention it, did he?” His lips turned down in a kind of disappointed judgment, and for once Peter was fairly certain it wasn’t directed at him. It was a refreshing change.

“It must have slipped his mind in his preparations for the pass.” Another thing which Chris had not thought to tell him, but Peter wasn’t counting.

Finstock sniffed, making clear his thoughts on that excuse. “The price feared your wardrobe would not be sufficient for the encroaching winter. So he arranged for the royal tailor to come for a fitting.” He held up a piece of paper. “I have a list, but beyond that, you are to order as you please.”

It was a thoughtful gesture, although Peter supposed it would be quite the embarrassment if the prince consort died from a lack of long underwear. He looked at his half eaten lunch then back at Finstock.

“How likely is he to sew me a shirt with three sleeves if I keep him waiting another half hour.”

Finstock had drifted back to staring venomously at his uncle. Which would be amusing if Deucalion even *noticed*, but of course he didn’t, because he never noticed staff. It was properly beneath his notice. Stupid, but entirely proper. He jerked back to Peter.

“She. And likely. However, I will send the princess to her first. They have only the matter of a coat between them, but it should occupy her attention until you arrive. Although,” his expression grew dour again, “I would have thought you would have indigestion by now.”

If Peter was put off his food every time Deucalion insulted him, he would have starved to death at a very young age. And cook’s food was too good to be spoiled by a man who wore more masks than even Peter.

“Stomach of iron,” he said pithily. “I will be there shortly.” He paused. “I assume the prince made arrangements for my uncle as well?” He could not imagine otherwise, especially as Deucalion had been nothing but the picture of propriety whenever in Chris’ presence. It had been Peter who had been easily painted the brat.

Finstock's nod was entirely proper, but Peter thought he saw a smirk hiding at the corner of his mouth. "Indeed, your highness. And as it would be impossible for Miss Elizabeth to complete both of your wardrobes in a timely manner, the Ladies Blake will be happy to loan their seamstress to Lord Hale."

Finstock looked too self satisfied for there not be some scheme afoot in this thing, but the last thing Peter wanted to do was derail it, so he just hummed, appropriately grave, as Deucalion nodded his approval.

"Thank you, Mr. Finstock. Please tell Miss Elizabeth I will join her shortly."

* * * * *

The fitting took a good three hours, because apparently Chris' list of what he thought was necessary was very long, and included clothes that would be cut in such a way that small daggers and god knows what other weapons could be hidden in small pockets in their folds. By the time they were done, with Elizabeth's firm promise of "*four days, tops, sire,*" it was more dark than day through the windows, but Allison was waiting by a door in the back of the kitchen, which he found only by dint of the map she had drawn for him in the note he had found waiting in his sitting room. Apparently she did not feel the need to follow her father's injunction. Or even ask for permission before entering.

He was not quite as eager to see the secret of Chris' greenhouses as he was this morning, mainly because the snow was *still* falling, and he could feel the chill seeping in through the sides of the door, despite the heat of the kitchen. He was afraid his rather thin cloak was going to be next to useless. But he had coaxed Allison into this against her pique, and he would not be so stupid as to back out now. As it was, she still did not look exactly thrilled when she caught sight of him, but he thought that was more something she was putting on than she actually felt. She did not seem to have the personality that naturally held grudges. He supposed that would serve Befastia well in the long run.

She was holding a large bundle of something in her arms and when he reached her she held it out. "I got it from my father's room. You can use it until yours is finished."

He took it and shook it out, to find it was a long overcoat, sewn out of the same type of animal pelt Julia had shown him earlier. He slid it on and was enveloped

in both warmth and the scent of Chris. He was immediately assaulted by visceral images from the previous night and had to suck in a breath to clear his head. His first impulse was to shove the coat off, but he could not quite find a way to politely say ‘Thank you for the thoughtful gesture but if I keep wearing this I’ll be half masted all day,’ to a twelve year old, so instead he wrapped it tighter around himself and tried to breathe through his mouth.

“Come on.” She did not wait to see if he followed but pushed on out of the door and into the snow. A path had been stamped down, but even then the snowfall had caught up enough that it reached to his ankles and he thanked whatever god that was that he had always insisted upon good, practical boots.

The snow made everything seem preternaturally quiet in the approaching dusk, and his voice was little more than a whisper when he spoke.

“Is it always this bad?”

She turned around to face him and kept walking backwards. He bit his tongue to keep from telling her to be careful, because she was doing just fine, her feet going blindly as if they had walked this path a thousand times before. Which they likely had.

“This?” She looked around at the piles of snow and wrinkled her nose. “This is not bad. This is barely winter. It’s when the ice comes...” She trailed off, looking off toward the mountain. It was not hard to follow where her thoughts were.

“Are you worried about him?”

She pursed her lips and shook her head. Then after a moment’s hesitation, changed and nodded. “A little. But he promised he would come back. And he always keeps his promises. Mostly I miss him.”

It hit him then that Chris was her only relative here. That no matter how horrid the king might have been at least last year she hadn’t been alone with just a houseful of staff and servants. And the unexpectedly acquired stepfather who had just driven her father back to the mountain pass. She had as much right to be bitter at their situation as he. Not that he would tell her that; his self preservation ran too great. Even if he had somehow woken up saddled with a stepchild. It was a good thing - for her - that there could be no reasonable expectation of him stepping into that role in more than name only.

She sniffed and touched her pelt hat. “Besides, Jill doesn’t do my hair nearly as well. She *pulls*.”

He nearly stumbled as the implications of that set in. “Are you saying the *prince* dresses your hair?” Surely he had misunderstood.

She nodded as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “As long as I can remember. Wasn’t it *grand* yesterday?” She twirled, her coat billowing out around her.

He recalled the intricate braidings she had sported. “Very grand indeed, princess.” His brain was doing funny things, trying to wind back up while simultaneously spitting out a picture of Chris carefully weaving Allison’s hair with a dozen pins clamped between his lips. He couldn’t decide if he should be amused or taken aback or unwillingly awed at the amount of skill such a setting must require. He kept thinking he had the prince fitted into this puzzle in his head, only to find the shape of the piece kept changing. He could not quite get a hold of the edge. So instead he changed the subject, as he was wont to do in these cases.

“Are we nearly there?”

“Just about.” They were approaching the stables and the smell of hay and horses and manure almost blocked out the scent of Chris that kept wafting about him every time he moved. A brown, dark haired boy was leading a horse back into one of the long, enclosed rows of stalls but stopped when he saw them.

“Alli— Princess.” His eyes flashed to Peter and then he bowed low. “It’s too late to ride. My father would skin me.”

Allison’s smile was warm and wide. “Tomorrow, Scott. I am taking Peter to see father’s workshops. But perhaps after he is settled you could help me check on Wolfsbane’s tack? The fittings on the saddle felt off yesterday. I don’t want him to get a sore.”

“Or you to fall, Princess.” Scott’s face showed genuine alarm at the thought and Peter could not be sure but he thought he saw color rise up in Allison’s cheeks. Interesting.

“Or me to fall. You will help? Or does your father need you to —”

“I can help,” Scott hastily filled in. “I will await you at her stall, Princess.” He bow and then trotted off, leading the horse beside him.

“Horse Master’s son?” He queried as they continued their trek across the commons.

She nodded, taking up the conversation eagerly. “Yes. He was born here. We grew up together. He and Stiles and I. Father let me come play here whenever he was busy and Mistress Deaton was unavailable. Stiles and Scott are best friends. Scott’s mother is the palace physician. Stiles’ mother is dead like mine. They were best friends, too. His father is Captain Stilinski. But I don’t think Stiles is going to be a soldier, even though his father wants him to be. He wants to apprentice with Deaton.”

Several thoughts flashed through his head, such as *Who names their child Stiles* and *How did a woman become a physician* (although he quickly surmised that was a stupid one; if their women led and killed, why then shouldn’t they also heal?) and *Is there some feud between Deaton and Stilinski I should know about?* It was always good to know where the rifts lay, just in case one needed to exploit them. But by the time Allison was finished rambling - and it was rambling, the first time he’d ever seen her do so, which meant she was either becoming more comfortable in his presence or nervous about something and trying to cover it up, and he was fairly certain they had not reached bosom buddy status in the last few minutes - they had reached the large double doors of a barn. Allison began to lift the long wooden bar out of its cradle.

“This is your father’s workshop?” In the stables. In a barn. Somehow, though, it made perfect sense.

She nodded, out of breath as he stepped around her and pulled the doors open. Light sprung out from lamps already lit and waiting. “One of them.”

He did not acknowledge her, too busy taking in the sight. There was a long wooden table down the center of almost the entire length of the barn, covered with papers and compasses and measuring tools. Stacks of wood, sorted to various shapes and sizes, were set along the walls, along with rolls of...some thin material he did not recognize.

“You have all you need, then?” Allison was bouncing from one foot to the other with ill disguised impatience. “You can find me in the stables when you are

done?”

Impatient chit, all of a sudden. Peter filed that away, more concerned with exploring the space than with whatever intrigue a twelve year old could manage to get involved in. He was fairly certain she was not planning on executing a coup with Scott, so there was that.

“Yes, yes, run along.” He waved her off before closing the door behind her to shut out the cold and lowering his hood. The table was old and uneven and obviously used just as much to construct on as to plan. There was a set of blueprints, marked through with Chris’ writing, which, when he deciphered them, were ideas of improvements aimed at the particular challenges Befastia faced. He could easily imagine Chris here, a crease of concentration between his eyes as he poured over the plans for hours, tweaking details here or there to try to increase efficiency.

It took a few minutes for him to be able to decode what Chris was doing. Somehow the materiel on the rolls - thin, transparent, and *bendable* - was taking the place of glass in the greenhouses. There were several scaled models built up on the worktable, carefully labeled with whether they were for a single family, or a farm, or a home in a village or city. Peter didn’t even question that Chris had built them himself, one peg at a time, rather than hire a craftsman to do it for him. Chris’ hands were certainly talented enough to handle such delicate work. Peter’s neck grew warm and he cleared his throat and moved back to the blueprints.

The mathematics were elegant for such a simple, rude project, and Peter picked up a short, nubby pencil, warm smooth from constant use. There were two slight indentions near the tip, where Chris’ fingers had consistently landed and eventually created their own permanent cradles. Peter could feel a kind of kinship with the pencil, and he really needed to stop thinking on things like that. And would, just as soon as his body stopped giving him constant reminders of Chris’ use of it.

He studied through Chris’ calculations for long moments, feeling a grudging respect for the thoroughness and precision with which he had tackled the issue. An idea hit him, halfway through his perusal of the third sheet - a simple change that might increase the efficiency of the thing. Engineering was not his forte, so he would need to see if the library - dear God let there at least be a *library* in the

palace - had any literature on the matter, but he made a few scribbled notes beside Chris' so he wouldn't lose the thought. Then, the chill of the evening reasserted itself and he re-bundled himself in preparation to find Allison and return to somewhere with actual *warmth*.

The sun was almost gone when he exited, but enough light spilled out from cracks in the stables' walls that he was not surrounded by darkness. The door to the east stable was cracked open, a larger slice of light illuminating the snow. Ten to one that was where Allison was. The snow muffled his footsteps as he approached and when he reached the opening it was clear his arrival had not been heard.

Allison and Scott stood in front of a stall, arranged like one of those tableaux street artists liked to try to pawn off on passing pedestrians. Scott's hand was on Allison's cheek and they were gazing warmly at each other, obviously finding the whole world in each other's faces. It was entirely inappropriate, even if there had been more than mere inches between them and Scott had been anything close to an acceptable station to court royalty.

Peter stepped inside and delicately cleared his throat and then took a moment to enjoy the ensuing chaos. Allison and Scott sprang apart, eyes wide and faces flushed and looking so incredibly guilty that Peter could have walked in just now and still guessed the nature of their meeting. He would have to teach the chit to hold a better poker face.

"Scott was..." Allison looked frantically at Scott for help, but he did no better at the game.

"She had a..." he made a vague, meaningless gesture, "...um...dirt on her face."

"I'm sure," Peter said drolly.

Allison's shoulders drooped and Scott looked frankly terrified. As he should. If it had been two hundred years earlier a flogging or even death would not have been unimaginable for such a trespass.

"Are you going to tell?" Allison, at least, had decided to drop the pretense and harden her jaw defiantly instead.

Peter considered his options. Weighed what he could gain against what might be

lost. The fleeting romance seemed innocent enough and reality would crush them soon enough. There were no doubt a dozen potential matches already set aside for Allison, and none of them included a stable boy.

“No,” he finally said, and then held up a cautioning finger against their relief. “Not unless he does something to make it necessary.” He gave Scott a hard look.

“I would *never* —” Scott started indignantly. Peter rolled his eyes.

“Of course you wouldn’t. So said every man who ever courted a woman. Be sure you keep to that; I know plenty of ways to make you *wish* I had run to the prince instead.”

He tried very hard to suppress his smirk as the color washed from Scott’s face. “Come, Allison. I think we’ve had enough of the outdoors for one day. Dinner will be soon and we should get changed.”

He led her from the building, glancing over his shoulder to send one, final, stern look in Scott’s direction. The boy’s mouth snapped shut from where he had been staring at Allison with soppy adoration, and he spun on his heel and hastened away in the opposite direction.

All in all, a good day’s work.

“Now, my dear,” he said conspiratorially to Allison, “let us discuss how one properly sets a sentry.”

Chapter 5

After a few days stationed at the mountain pass, a soldier forgets what warmth is. Forgets what it feels like not to have bitter cold seep through coats and uniforms and long johns and bones. To not have hands that chap and crack and bleed. Soldiers slept burrowed together at night, under piles of blankets that trapped blessed shared heat. Even sitting in tents or wood shelters, around fires that blazed, there was no real warmth. Each day eventually blurred into the next, in a kind of numbness that could kill you if it slid into unawareness.

Chris sat at one such fire, clutching a steaming cup of brandy in one hand and a letter from Deaton in the other. The tent he was under sheltered him from the freezing sleet that had decided to fall but did little to block out the real chill. The outpost at the mountain pass was a grueling, miserable assignment, which was why they rotated the soldiers out regularly. Double rotations were only enforced as the harshest kind of punishment, which was why they were so effective. Fortunately such punishment was rare; it had not been meted out for two winters running.

Chris tried to force his eyes to focus on the paper in hand. He had spent far too many hours staring blindly into the fire, mind replaying in perfect detail the night before he had left. Focus. He needed to focus. He had received several such updates since he had left, including one rambling one from Mr. Finstock, in which he had indignantly relayed a conversation he had overheard between Deucalion and Peter. Chris' face darkened in remembrance. Peter had held his own, and by doing so had won a place in Finstock's notoriously cantankerous heart, but Chris was not content to let the incident pass unacknowledged. With Peter now safely married, there was no real reason for Deucalion's presence. As soon as the thaw came, the man would be returning to Genovia. Chris refused to have Peter subjected to such a poisonous and insulting tongue.

The rest of the letters were the usual missives from Deaton, updating him on the affairs of the estate. From them, he had learned that Peter was settling in, that he was far handier with pistol and blade than he had initially let on - a knot in Chris' shoulders he had not been aware he was carrying unwound when he read that - and that he was spending most of his time with either Allison or Captain Stilinski, or out in the stable yards. He had somehow managed to worm his way into cook's affections, and the opinion of the staff was that he seemed, over all,

decently content.

All in all it confirmed to Chris that he had made the right decision to leave. Peter had found his feet easier without an unwanted husband constantly staring him in the face.

A raucous laugh drew his attention to the table, where his personal guard were engaged in a rowdy game of cards. Stilinski had been right about Boyd and Lahey; together, they had taken to their post easily, despite the weather and ever constant need for watchfulness. Reyes had taken them under her wing, and after that it had only been a matter of time before they had blended in seamlessly with Aidan and Ethan and Kira, who had, before Boyd and Lahey's arrival, constituted, with Reyes, his guard for the last two years.

They were all young, and all personally trained by him. When they had to fight, it was with deadly efficiency. They would stay with him for another year, maybe two at the most, and then go on to lead platoons and battalions of their own. A place in the prince's guard nearly guaranteed a leadership role in the future.

He watched with a small smile as they traded cards and insults, Reyes sitting between Boyd and Lahey and skewering them verbally every chance she got, and Kira leaning back in her chair on two legs as she regarded the three of them with a faint air of amusement. Aidan and Ethan were on guard duty, and would be rotated out with Kira and Reyes in another two hours. It had been...useful...having Boyd and Lahey close. He had used the time to unobtrusively mine their knowledge of Peter, of what they knew of him, of what their thoughts were. He suspected that by the third day they had known he was fishing, because it was then they started offering up information without him even having to ask.

It was mainly rumor, of course, as Peter was rarely home, and even when he was, his path was not likely to cross that of a common soldier. But what they did know confirmed the picture Talia had painted, of a son given more money than affection, who was proud and witty and prone to verbally decimating anyone in his way, servant or nobility alike.

He had just tucked away Deaton's letter when Ethan appeared at the doorway of the tent. He bowed perfunctorily, which let Chris know a visitor had arrived.

"Captain Stilinski, your majesty." He withdrew, and Stilinski took his place.

Chris stood, slightly befuddled. “Captain. Come, get warm. Have a brandy. Is something wrong at the palace? I was not expecting you until —”

Stilinski took the offered brandy with a bemused air. “Your majesty, it is the month. I’ve brought the new troops. Time to go home. Your daughter will be most pleased to see you. And,” he said delicately, “I think, perhaps your husband.”

Chris most seriously doubted that, but he hoped that with Peter feeling more comfortable in their home, they might at the very least be able to build a civil partnership. And if he was truly getting along with Allison, then so much the better.

“You lost track of time again,” Stilinski observed gravely.

Chris shrugged. “Possibly. But you know what it is like out here. One day bleeds to the next. Only a fight delineates them.”

“It is colder this year.”

“Yes. We’ve doubled the guard at the holes. Pray we don’t bring too many sons and daughters back in boxes. Or that we will at least have bodies to bring back at all.” Chris could get lost if he stared too long into that abyss, so he shook it off. “I’ll start them to packing.”

“We should make it fast. There is the feel of a storm in the air.”

* * * * *

A loud thud woke Peter. The only light coming through the window was the reflection of the moon off piles and piles of snow, so the hour had to be late (or very early as the case may be). He hung in that place half between awake and asleep and had just begun the slide back toward sleep when another thud followed. It came from the general direction of Chris’ rooms; he was tempted to just roll over and go back to sleep, unsure the palace being possibly under attack was enough impetus to leave the warmth of his bed. But then a third thud followed.

Peter sighed grumpily before throwing back the bed covers and grabbing his dressing robe. He did not bother with slippers, but did palm the small dagger on

the bedside table on his way to the door joining he and Chris' bed chambers. He had learned that pistols were not nearly so valued here as blades; apparently they had less of an effect upon the Undead than sharp steel. Not to mention the reload time was all they needed to sink their teeth into an unsuspecting soldier.

When he swung the door open it revealed a single lit lamp, and one Christopher Argent, in the seemingly arduous process of pulling off his boots. Chris looked up at the noise and Peter let the hand holding the dagger drop to his side.

"You're back," he said dumbly.

Chris nodded, finally dislodging the last boot and letting it drop to the ground. He was still in uniform, buckskin breaches molding tightly to his legs and jacket buttoned to his chin. Molding a little *too* tightly; closer inspection revealed they were soaked through, and a small puddle was gathering on the floor. Chris' great overcoat was in a heap beside him, making a similar mess on the area rug. Some servant was going to be very put out tomorrow, and it was not like Chris to purposely make life harder for the people around him.

"I'm s-s-sorry I woke you. We planned to be b-back earlier, but there was a storm. And then I n-n-needed to see the s-s-soldiers settled." Peter could barely understand him over the chattering of his teeth, and now that he was looking, he could see that his lips were nearly blue. He closed the door behind him and stepped into the room. Chris' hands were fumbling with the buttons of his jacket, fingers far clumsier than they should be. A low grade curse escaped his lips as his grasp slipped from the button yet again.

"Call your man. Let him help you."

Chris shook his head, finally managing to get one button undone. "It's late. He's t-t-too old to be up at this hour." He had begun shivering and Peter quickly crossed the space between them.

"If he is that old, it might be time to replace him."

Chris managed to look scandalized, even as he continued to wrestle unsuccessfully with his clothing, his hands still too numb to find real purchase. "He has been with me since I was a *child*!"

"Of course he has," Peter drolled. "Cease. Just cease, for God's sake." He

swatted Chris' hands from their task and replaced them with his own. "Let me help you or you'll be here all night."

"I'm *fine*," Chris protested, although it was somewhat ruined by the fact he stumbled over the 'fine' part of the sentence. Then he paused, his brows drawing together. "You cut your hair," he said stupidly.

Peter managed, just barely, to keep from touching the newly bared back of his neck self consciously. "Yes. It seemed the thing to do. When in Rome and all that." Then he moved on to the thing of actual importance. "And of course you are fine. Now stand still so I can do this." This close, Peter could feel the cold radiating off of Chris. When his knuckles brushed across his neck as he finished the last button of Chris' jacket, it was ice, not human warmth, he touched.

"You idiot," he muttered, as he pushed Chris jacket off his arms and to the floor. He jerked the rough woolen shirt Chris wore from his pants before moving to loosen the laces at his neck. "Have you no care at all for your health?" Of course Chris would see to his soldiers before getting himself to warmth. The man had no self preservation at all. And his staff were complete blockheads for letting him get away with it. "Arms up."

Chris looked utterly put upon that Peter was not letting him freeze to death all on his own, but when Peter finally got his shirt off, he couldn't stop the "Christ, *fuck*," that slipped from his mouth as the cold air hit already chilled skin.

"Christopher," Peter drawled, "I hadn't thought you had it in you. We'll have to see about washing your mouth out with soap later."

Chris actually looked ashamed, because of course he did, and Peter smirked to cover the genuine concern he was beginning to feel about Chris' physical state. He had stumbled upon hypothermia in the surprisingly large library the palace held, and the fact that Chris' skin had not begun to warm was a bad sign.

He quickly undid Chris' sodden breeches, ignoring his protests. "Off you go now." He shoved both buckskin and small clothes down his hips, revealing clammy flesh that made getting the clothes off a battle. When all of Chris' clothes were in a damp pile on the floor, Peter pointed to the bed and then took off his dressing gown.

"What are you —" Chris paused, shivering, at the edge of the bed as Peter pulled

his nightshirt over his head.

“Your body has stopped producing heat, which if you weren’t already freezing to death, you would know. You refuse to call your man or wake anyone to put bricks in the bed and we both know the next best way to get you warm is skin to skin.”

“I’m fi—”

“*Shut up. Get in bed and let me help you.*”

Chris’ mouth snapped shut as he stared at Peter, and then to Peter’s surprise, he actually *obeyed*. Peter was not sure which of them was more taken aback at that, but at the moment he cared less about that than the fact Chris was finally beneath the covers. Peter finished pulling his long underwear off and climbed in with him.

He wrapped his arms and legs around him, and it was more akin to wrapping them around a block of ice than a human being. Chris was shivering violently, and Peter pressed the soles of his feet over top of Chris’, managing to stifle his hiss at the cold. But Chris’ bed was covered with a good number of blankets, and thick ones at that, and eventually the warmth settled in and very, very gradually Chris’ shivering began to cease.

When he was finally still, and his skin felt less like icicles and more like human being, Peter asked, “Did the soldiers get settled in their barracks?”

Chris’ voice was drowsy and sluggish when he answered. “Mmmhmm. S’always kept warm f’them.” His words ran on, as if he thought the junction of the ideas made perfect sense. “I like you hair.”

Another shiver wracked him, and Peter tightened his hold, tucking his knees in flush behind Chris’ and ignoring his unintentional rambling, as well as the unwelcome flush the approval brought. “Did they all come back?” he inquired quietly.

Another nod. “S’only the beginning, though.” He sounded sad, even as Peter could tell he was beginning the drift to sleep.

“How is it out there?”

“S’bad.” Chris let out a long breath of air, and if Peter did not know better, he would say Chris actually pressed closer into the spoon of Peter’s body, greedy for warmth. “Cold. Colder than usual. Means—”

“A bad year,” Peter finished for him. You learned a lot if you kept your ears open, and Peter had learned the temperature had a great deal to do with when the Undead attempted their crossings. It was why they never came in the summer, and why, when winters were particularly bad, they came in swarms. The year Victoria had died had been the coldest winter in one hundred years.

“We will worry on that in the morning. For now, be warm. And sleep.”

A shiver passed from head to toe, but less intense than the others, and Peter pressed his hands flat across the firm muscle of Chris’ chest and abdomen and tucked his chin into his neck. “Sleep,” he said again, and only stayed awake long enough to make sure Chris obeyed.

* * * * *

Chris woke in utter, delicious warmth for the first time in weeks, with a heavy weight pinning him to the bed. It was several seconds of confusion before he remembered where he was and realized he and Peter had shifted during the night, so that he now lay on his back with Peter splayed across him.

In the warm light of morning, he knew Peter had been right, that he had stubbornly let himself get too cold. It was just something of a surprise that Peter had recognized it and stepped in before Chris did himself serious harm.

Peter mumbled in his sleep and shifted further over Chris. It had been so long since Chris had *slept* with someone and he had to resist the urge to curl around Peter like a great cat, just to soak in the contact. His arms had found their way around him as they’d slept, and he cautiously, *guiltily* dragged them up and down Peter’s spine. It was not especially sexual, although he was unable to say it was expressly *not* either, because Peter felt *right* on and against him, and the ungrateful *selfishness* of what he was doing settled like stale bread in his gut. He didn’t stop though, at least not until Peter’s mumbling turned grumpy. Then, he snatched his hands away and balled them in fists at his side. It had to have been unpleasant against the smooth curve of Peter’s back. If his hands had been rough before, they were utterly *ruined* now, red and chapped and cracked and bleeding from long days in the bitter cold. His actions suddenly seemed even more of a

trespass than before.

Peter raised his head and said blearily, “You stopped.” It was said without judgment, which somehow made Chris feel worse.

“Yes. I’m sorry. I’d forgotten what the pass does to my hands.” Forgotten what it was like to have someone who might care about those things.

Peter rolled his eyes, before flopping back down across Chris, seemingly unconcerned about the fact they were both nude and skin to skin. “I think you are far more concerned about the state of your hands than I am.”

“But you—”

Peter put a hand over his mouth. “You jumped to conclusions.” He paused and conceded, “It’s possible I worded it poorly. Go back to sleep. It’s early.”

It was tempting. Just give in and curl back up with the warmth and the contact. But —

“I cannot,” he said regretfully. “I need to check on the soldiers and see if Alli—”

“Then you ring the bell, summon a servant, and have them do it for you. It’s one of the better perks of being titled.” He gestured to the long bell rope next to the bed, the motion shifting him further on top of Chris. Chris’ need to remove himself became suddenly more urgent.

“It is not the servant’s responsibility! They need to see that I do not abandon them just because we return home. I need to let the house know —”

“When was the last time you took care of you?”

Peter’s question brought him up short, and his hands stopped in their abortive movement to rise, landing on the small of Peter’s back. “I do not understand your meaning.”

Peter pushed up again, propping his elbows on Chris’ chest so that there were eye to eye and Chris could see in close detail that his memories of Peter’s mouth had not been overblown.

“One of the advantages to being left to one’s own devices after being abandoned by one’s husband—” Chris opened his mouth to protest and Peter steamrolled over him. “—is that one is free to observe and ask as many questions as one would like without interference. And your people have a great deal to say about *you*.”

Chris was affronted as well as feeling slightly betrayed. What exactly had occurred that would put that slightly scolding tone into Peter’s voice?

“I think I have acquired a decent picture of you, your highness. You take care of your soldiers, you take care of your people, you take care of Allison. But who, pray tell, takes care of you?”

“I am a man grown! I need no —”

“And you make my *point*!”

“Peter! I have a responsibility, and I *need to get out of this bed*.” His tone was perhaps a bit more desperate than he had intended.

“Name one reason— Name *one* good reason you cannot take one day to yourself. Cannot lie abed and let the people whose job it is *do those jobs*. You said it yourself!” Peter eyes were flashing and he grabbed one of Chris’ hands and brought it to his face, the deep cracks and raw places exposed for both to see. “You are *injured*. Half frozen and windburned and we won’t even talk about the bruises and cuts over the rest of your body. You are no good to your people - to *Allison* - if you get pneumonia and die! So name *one* good reason.”

The color was high on Peter’s cheeks as he glared down at Chris, silently demanding an answer and showing no signs whatsoever that he could be moved or reasoned with. Chris let his head fall back as he finally confessed.

“I am in bed with a beautiful man. I do not want to insult or sully your kindness.”

Peter’s face showed no understanding. “That is a both a piss poor reason *and* one that makes no sense. Did your brain get frost bite in the —”

Chris sighed in defeat and shifted his legs beneath Peter, making certain there was no way Peter could misunderstand what he had delicately left unsaid.

Peter sucked in a harsh breath. Then, as Chris watched, his eyes dilated and his tongue swept out to drag over his bottom lip.

“Well, Christopher, if you *really* want to thank me, I have a few ideas.” He leaned in closer, his legs tangling with Chris’ as he braced his hands on either side of Chris’ head. Then he was so close Chris could feel his breath against his mouth, and Chris’ hand, entirely without his permission, slid its way up Peter’s back and cupped the smooth, newly shorn back of his neck. He leaned up, already anticipating the taste of Peter’s mouth, and —

A loud banging sounded on the door to his outer chamber.

“Father! Father? Scott said you were home! Is it true?”

Peter groaned and rolled off of Chris, throwing his arm over his eyes. “This is the chit’s revenge,” he muttered. “*Revenge.*”

“Wha-?” Chris tried very hard not to stare, tried very hard not to notice the evidence that Peter had been just as interested in the proceedings as had he.

“Never mind.” Peter stood and quickly gathered his things. “Allison has missed you. She first deserves your time.” He was halfway through their adjoining door when he said evenly, “I shall see you both at breakfast.”

The door closed and Chris was saved from staring dumbly at it by Allison calling for him again. He hastily rose and threw on his dressing gown. “Yes, I came in late. I didn’t want to wake you.” He took several deep breaths until his body was his own again, and then walked to the door.

When he opened the door Allison flung herself at him and he barely had time to get his arms up to catch her.

“There, there,” he soothed. “I’m here. It’s okay. I’m here.” He stroked her tangled mess of bed head hair and tilted her chin up. There was wetness in the corners of her eyes and he felt a punch of guilt low in his gut. “I’m sorry if I worried you.”

She sniffed and then in a matter of seconds was completely composed again. “It is of no matter. I am fine. I kept the court safe in your absence.” He felt another stab of guilt when he realized she had learned that skill from him.

“Well,” he chuckled her chin. “*I missed you*. Allow me to dress, and perhaps we can catch Peter at breakfast. You might think about finding clothes as well.”

She grinned, all sunshine again. “He gets cook to make eclairs *every* morning. Can we take him to the ice caves today? I waited for you.”

“Perhaps tomorrow. I need to check on the state of the —”

Allison’s face fell, and he quickly backpedaled. “It can wait. We shall go today.”

“Truly?” The hopeful excitement in her eyes was almost painful to see.

“Truly. Now go get dressed. We shall let Jill have your hair today in the interest of time.”

She bounced on her toes. “Yes, father. Oh! Wait until you see what Peter has done!”

With that inexplicable tidbit, she whirled back around and out the door. It was only after she was gone that it occurred to him he should have asked how exactly she had managed to talk to Scott so early in the morning.

It took rather longer to get dressed than expected, because he decided to ring for a bath. Just because they were surrounded by water at the pass did not meant they were exempt from sweat and road dust and the stench of horses. And scrubbing down with snow only did so much.

Washed and groomed and dressed once again as a prince should be, he left his rooms, only to find his secretary waiting patiently by his door.

“Your majesty.” He held out a sheet of paper. “I have scheduled your meeting with Mr. Deaton directly following breakfast, and then you will have just enough time to meet with Mr. Finstock before lunch. After you have dined, Captain Stilinski’s second is expecting you at the barracks to —”

“Reschedule everything for tomorrow.”

“Sire?” Chris thought he could be excused his shocked look. It was the first time Chris could remember that he had ever put off the ever present call of duty.

“Tomorrow. I have an appointment with my daughter and the prince consort today. The rest can wait.”

His secretary coughed into his fist, and Chris thought he caught the faint edges of a smile behind his glove. “Very good, sire. A day of rest is not uncalled for.”

When exactly had this widespread opinion settled that he never *rested*? He refused to enter into a debate with his secretary, so he held his tongue as the man excused himself. Then he turned, only to find Peter leaning against his own door frame, the raised eyebrow making it obvious he had observed the entire exchange. His hair was slightly damp, making Chris think he, too, had taken the opportunity to bathe.

“We have an appointment?”

Chris gave a sharp nod and then cleared his throat to cover his sudden awkwardness. “Yes. Allison would have a trip to the ice caves.”

“Ah. She has been babbling about them quite a bit.”

A part of Chris wanted to take offense at his words, but the look on his face was *fond*, and so Chris did not think he meant them as an insult. Peter did not seem any more eager than he to discuss what had nearly happened earlier, so Chris nodded toward the stairway.

“Shall we to breakfast?”

Peter pushed off the wall and joined Chris. As they walked, Peter gave him a thorough once over before facing front again. “You look less like you are about to die.” Then he sniffed. “And smell less like horse.” There was a small smile playing around the corners of his mouth as they continued down the stairs. Chris was beginning to think it mattered less *what* Peter said, and more *how* he said it.

“And you,” he shot back, feeling his own face fight against a smile, “smell more like an ass.”

And then he was caught out staring again, because Peter threw back his head and *laughed*. It lit up his face and stretched a wide grin across his lips and when he turned to share his mirth with Chris the smile stayed for a long moment. And even when it died, the humor in his eyes remained.

A hesitant, half smile moved on Chris' face and he said cautiously, "Peter..."

He had not been sure what he was going to say when he started, and he was saved from having to fumble through what no doubt would have been a verbal disaster by the appearance of Melissa McCall at the bottom of the staircase, doctor's bag in hand. She was one of the few people allowed free access to the family's quarters.

"There you are," she said briskly, setting her bag on a decorative hall table and opening it up. She pulled out a jar of salve and tape. "Give me your hands," she ordered.

"How did you—" He narrowed his eyes and shot Peter an irritated look.

Peter shrugged, not bothered in the slightest. "*I know how to use the bell.*"

"My hands are fine." He tucked them behind his back. Not because he was hiding said hands. It was simply an appropriate posture. "It's the soldiers you should be —"

"The soldiers," she scolded, "are bandaged the moment they come in. You are the only person foolish enough to press through like this is nothing. Do not forget, highness, you may rule, but you are still a soldier. And as such, it is your duty to the country to keep yourself whole in order to serve. Now, *give me your hands.*"

She stared him down, palm held implacably out and waiting, and if it weren't for the fact Chris was an *adult*, he would be sorely tempted to kick Peter in the shins for the snickers he can see him working to hold in. Finally, with far less grace than likely appropriate, he presented his hands to Melissa.

She hissed at the damage and the look in her eye turned angry. "Did you even wear gloves this time?"

"Of course!" he said defensively, "But you know you cannot —"

"You're lucky you don't have permanent damage from frostbite!" She continued to lecture as she spread salve over and around the deep cracks in his palms and knuckles. "You, take this." She slapped the bottle of salve into Peter's hands without so much as looking at him, and then used her teeth to tear off a strip of

bandaging.

“These should be bandaged over completely.” She wrapped thin strips over his palms. “But I know if I do that you’ll just take them off.” She tied the cloth off, leaving most of his fingers and thumb free. “So you will wear these, and you will have them re-bandaged every night until they are *healed*, or so help me I will put you in mittens! Do you understand me?”

“Madam,” he replied stiffly, “I think the whole wing understands you.”

“Good. Now, can I trust these by your room or do I need to give them to him?” She stabbed a finger in Peter’s direction.

“I am perfectly capable of—”

“That’s debatable.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “But we’ll pretend for the moment you’re right. I’ll check on you tomorrow.” Without another word she stepped around them and moved up the stairs.

Peter’s smirk was back, although it lacked the nasty twist Chris had last seen. “Are you sure you’re the prince here, or...”

“I’m not talking to you,” he said childishly, then pretended not to hear Peter’s snicker as they resumed their trek to breakfast.

Chapter 6

“Bloody hell, child! How many did you *eat*?” Peter sounded frankly offended as they entered the breakfast room and found Allison waiting for them. She was putting the last bit of an eclair into her mouth, and the platter carrying the rest of them was a good third empty.

“As many as I wanted to.” Her tone was cheeky as she stared him down. “You took too long.” She looked between the two of them. “I got hungry. Besides, there is more.”

Peter harrumphed and then plopped down across from her. “Not if we’d have been five minutes later. And then you would have had a stomach ache, *beastie*. Would have spoiled that trip to the ice caves, now, wouldn’t it?” He pulled a plate of sausage toward him and stabbed several onto his plate.

Chris sat down next to Peter, watching the two of them in bemusement. “She has a name, you know.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “Of course I know. Princess, Allison, her royal highness, the once and future queen, and greedy little *beastie*.”

Allison giggled and went back to eating her egg. Chris clumsily handled his utensils around his bandages and tried to swallow through the sudden lump in his throat. Luckily he was distracted by the appearance of an unfamiliar member of the kitchen staff. She placed carafes of hot coffee and lingonberry juice on the table before curtsying and returning the way she’d come.

“Where’s Marie?” The same girl had been assigned to the duty of the breakfast room for the last three years.

Peter answered. “Her sister was ill. I gave her leave to go home to tend to her. Rebecca is her temporary replacement.” Peter looked at him from beneath his lashes and then became completely absorbed in cutting his sausage into tiny pieces. “I thought you would not mind.”

Chris shook his head. “No, of course not. We should make sure she has a stipend and see if Doctor McCall has someone she can recommend to—”

“Both have already been done. By all accounts her sister should recover with time.” Peter continued to cut into his sausage as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

The inexplicable lump was back in his throat. He put his hand on Peter’s shoulder and said quietly, “Thank you.”

Peter shrugged, then finally left off with the food to look again at Chris. “There’s nothing to thank me for.” The smirk was back, self deprecating this time. “You told me the staff would listen to me as they did to you. So I thought I might should act as if it were you. Personally, I would have fired her.”

“Liar.” He was vaguely aware of Allison watching them in quiet fascination, but was too busy studying Peter to give much mind to it. “How can I —” He had a hand on Peter’s jaw when a cool voice interrupted him.

“Your majesty, you have returned! No one informed me or I would have been here to greet you.”

He dropped his hand back to his lap and turned to see Deucalion gliding into the room. He sounded perfectly pleasant and polite, but he didn’t need Peter’s minute stiffening beside him to bring to mind exactly what Deucalion was like when no one he thought mattered was watching.

“I came in late last night,” he answered gravely. “It would have been poor manners to disturb you. Even Allison was not aware until this morning.”

Deucalion seated himself at the head of the table. “But surely you let your husband know.”

Chris was not sure if Deucalion was trying to embarrass Peter because he was sure Peter would have been low on Chris list of priorities, or if he was trying to snidely point out *Chris*’ flaws, but either way, the insinuation grated at him. He smiled warmly at Peter and lightly touched his hand before withdrawing in the picture of propriety.

“Of course. I would not have it otherwise.”

Deucalion made a tiny *ah* noise before reaching for the coffee carafe. Chris smiled thinly. “You must be looking forward to returning to Genovia.”

There was barely a stutter in Deucalion's movement as he poured his coffee, but it was there, and Chris noted it with satisfaction. Deucalion finished pouring and carefully set the carafe down. "I'm not sure what you are referring to, sire."

"You came as Peter's chaperone, no? Obviously," he turned to Peter and smiled warmly, ignoring the fact Peter himself was looking at him with a mixture of intrigue and bemusement, "Peter no longer needs his good name protected. Or rather, that protection is now in my hands. I am very sure the Hale House eagerly waits your return."

"Here's another thought," Peter said, "I am perfectly capable of protecting my own good name. I can also feed myself and dress myself as well. It's rather amazing what a full grown man can do."

"See?" Chris said smoothly, refusing to be drawn into an argument with Peter, especially as Peter was right. Deucalion would not be swayed by those kinds of things. "Propriety has been satisfied. No need to subject yourself to a strange land any longer than necessary. As soon as the thaw comes, I will arrange an appropriate escort for your return."

"Your majesty," Deucalion answered just as smoothly, "I see there has been some misunderstanding. Likely as we have not yet had time to truly talk. As you saw on the day of our arrival, my nephew still needs...counseling. I am here to counsel him. It was his father's wish he be guided away from any...foolish mistakes."

Chris dropped the pretense of politeness, furious at the blatant insult to his husband, and even more enraged that Deucalion obviously believed Chris would agree with him. His voice was cold and steely.

"The only thing the prince consort has been guilty of is refusing to go quietly into an arrangement he found distasteful. Not all of us are so grateful to be bartered and sold against our will. I fail to see what is so foolish about that, regardless of *propriety*. What I *do* see is that you seem to have no respect for my husband or his position, and if you do not respect him, you do not respect *me*. And I will *not* subject the prince consort to so poisonous a tongue, no matter how well you dress it up in fine words and false concern. Has this clarified the issue for you, *Lord Hale*?"

Deucalion set his cup down. "Of course, Prince Argent. You, of course, know

best. Now,” he wiped his mouth delicately with his napkin, “If you will excuse me, I fear the sausage was too rich for my stomach. I think I should lay down.”

“Of course,” Chris allowed graciously. “We shall be gone for lunch, but should you feel better, we look forward to seeing you at dinner.”

No one spoke as Deucalion exited. Once he was gone, Allison narrowed her eyes at the spot he had vacated. “Good,” she proclaimed emphatically, then went back to her meal.

Chris found Peter watching him. He didn’t look particularly *angry*, just thoughtful and perhaps a bit perplexed. “You understand I have lived with my uncle’s opinions my entire life. I am perfectly capable of handling him on my own.”

Chris shrugged and grabbed the last remaining éclair. The others had somehow disappeared during his conversation with Deucalion. “I know you are. But you don’t have to, not anymore. And why would I sit by as he insulted you? You are my *husband*.”

If anything, the line between Peter’s brow grew deeper. “In arrangement only.”

“You are still my husband.” Then he stopped. “Has no one spoken for you before?”

Now Peter looked angry. “Of course they have!” But it was a bit too fast, a bit too defensive for Chris to be sure he fully believed him.

“Beyond Talia?” he pushed.

“I...didn’t...need...*help*.” Peter hissed, and Chris knew he’d hit the mark. The anger he felt now was entirely directed toward the Elder Hale and his wife, but he pushed it down, because there was no way his anger would do anything for Peter now.

He sidestepped Peter’s declaration all together. “No one in this family should have to stand alone. Would you step aside while your uncle insulted Allison?”

“That is *different*.”

Chris did not deign to answer, but the look he gave Peter was eloquent.

Peter huffed and turned back to his meal, but the anger was gone. “You have made an enemy of him. He does not take humiliation well.”

“I do not consider it such a loss. If he was friends with my father, it is doubtful we would have had much in common anyway.”

Peter pressed his lips together and shook his head. “Eat your food, Christopher. Allison is chomping at the bit to see the ice caves.”

* * * * *

Peter and Allison were already waiting at the stables when Chris arrived after finishing his own wardrobe change. He was pleased to see his tailor had followed his instructions and that Peter’s legs were encased in buckskins more suitable to their outing than breeches. And he had a decent coat of waterproofed pelts. Which somehow looked familiar. He peered closer as Allison chatted away with Scott by the horses.

“Is that one of my coats? Did Elizabeth not make you your own? I told her to —”

He couldn’t be sure because of the cold, but he thought Peter’s cheeks reddened. “She did. Allison brought me this in the interim, though. I never bothered switching. I apologize. I shall return it this evening.”

“No...no. You should keep it.” In a way he could not explain, something settled deep inside him at seeing Peter wearing his things. Something uncomfortably like satisfaction.

He turned away so he would not have to see Peter’s reaction to his words and walked over to the horses.

“Thank you, Scott, I believe we can take it from here.”

He strapped the rather large picnic package Cook had thrust upon him to his saddlebags and then mounted. Only then did he look for Peter, and found him mounting his own beast as Scott assisted Allison in mounting Wolfsbane. The assistance was not strictly necessary, but Chris chose not to comment on it.

“Ready, all?”

Peter nodded while Allison chirped back, “Ready!”

“Alright, then. Let’s be on our way.”

* * * * *

“My God,” Peter breathed, as he looked in wonder about him. He was standing in a huge cavern, literally every inch of which was covered in ice. Sunlight coming through what must be cracks in the ceiling bounced off of polished ice surfaces and cast rainbows everywhere he looked. Stalagmites and Stalactites rose and fell to tremendous heights.

“This is amazing.” He felt more than saw Chris come up beside him. “Truly one of the most wondrous things I have ever seen.”

Chris’ smile was pleased, making him look younger than his actual years. “It has always been a favorite of mine. I used to come here a fair bit when I was younger.”

“Does it not melt when the spring comes?”

“Peter, look!” Allison momentarily called his attention away and as he watched, she took off at a run. Before he could caution her to be careful, she made a tiny hop and then slid fast along a large swatch of ice, her arms held out from her sides to balance her. When she reached the opposite side she grabbed hold of an outcropping of ice and swung about to a stop.

She made a sweeping bow as Peter clapped. Beside him, Chris was laughing, the corners of his eyes crinkling pleasantly. All the stiffness he seemed to cloak himself with at the palace had melted away, leaving him relaxed and unguarded.

“The rest of us,” he said, as he reached into the bag he had carried with him from the horses, “use skates.” He pulled out two metal blades attached to what looked like shoe soles, also of metal, with leather straps and passed them to Peter, then pulled out two more before spreading an oiled blanket on the ground and dropping the bag upon it.

“Am I to understand you expect me to put these on my boots and skate about on

the ice?”

Chris nodded, still grinning, and sat down on the blanket. “It’s not difficult, I promise. All a matter of balancing. You can handle a blade, you can handle this.” He pulled off his gloves and started strapping a skate to one foot.

“This is ridiculous,” Peter scoffed. Chris just grabbed hold of his pant legged and tugged.

“You’re not scared are you? After all, *Allison* can do it.”

Peter rolled his eyes at Chris’ deliberately obvious tactics. “Are we twelve then? Left to jibes and boyish baiting?” Nevertheless he sat down at Chris’ side and began the work of strapping the skates on. “If I break my neck, remember you shall be the one to explain my death to my family. Talia will likely never forgive you.”

Chris grabbed his ankle and tugged him around until they were facing, and then finished strapping the second skate to Peter’s foot. As he pulled the strap tight he smiled brightly. “Don’t worry. If you fall, I’ll catch you.”

Then he stood, balancing impossibly on the blades, and pulled Peter up after him. Peter stumbled and Chris caught him under the arms, pulling him to him. “Careful, now.” His breath was warm against Peter’s ear. “It will be easier once we step onto the lake.”

“It’s a *lake*? What are we supposed to do if the ice *breaks*?”

Chris transferred his grip to just one of Peter’s hands, and began leading him to where the ice smoothed out, carefully picking their way along a path that was well worn and well used. “We won’t. This isn’t like your winters, or that thin skim on Genovia lakes. This is near a foot thick at this time of year. To answer your earlier question, no, this place never fully melts. But the ice is thinner in the summer. I don’t allow Allison here then.”

They had reached the edge now, and Allison was waiting impatiently for them, having somehow gotten actual skates on her own feet as well.

“Ready?” Chris looked over his shoulder at him, his eyes sparkling as he stepped on the frozen lake top. His gloved hand was warm and sure around Peter’s and

he didn't break eye contact as he skated backwards until their arms were stretched taut between them and Peter would either have to break the hand clasp or step onto the lake as well. "I've got you."

Peter rolled his eyes. "How reassuring." Then he took a deep breath and stepped onto the ice.

* * * * *

Two hours later the three of them threw themselves, panting, down on the blanket. Peter was hot enough from the exertion that he would have liked to have taken off his scarf and coat, but he had learned enough in the last month to know that was the surest way to get sick. Instead he stretched his legs out and groaned at the bumps and bruises he knew were forming. True to Chris' words, he had *not* fallen, but there had been plenty of near misses and knee lands.

Allison tucked her hands into her muff. "I told you it would be marvelous!" she challenged.

"That you did, little beastie. But I still maintain your father is the only reason I did not crack my head open." Peter's body still wasn't sure what to do with the immediate and careful way Chris had been there every time his balance was lost, with either a hand on a shoulder or arm to correct his fall or, once or twice, wrapping around him entirely when he'd completely lost his feet.

"It's not my fault he's stronger than me!" Allison protested.

Chris had been watching the interplay silently, a small smile playing about his lips, but now he reached out and tweaked Allison's ear. "Never fear, my little arrow. Your agility outstrips my muscle any day." Then his smile bloomed to fruition when he turned to Peter, and really, the man's smile should be classified as a weapon of war. "And you only needed me at the start. I told you you would be fine."

He *had* picked it up far easier than he'd expected, but even after it had been some time since he had fallen, he could still turn and find Chris' eyes fastened ever watchful on him. A part of him would like to pretend it was for more than just making sure he did not fall on his arse, more than the prince's natural inclination to protect everyone around him. It was a part to which he did not want to give any attention or credence because he *knew* what lay down that road.

Chris apparently saw nothing amiss in his lack of response and was chatting amicably with Allison as he dug around in the sack he had brought.

“Ah ha!” He pulled out Cook’s pouch, which turned out to contain cold chicken, thick slabs of bread, and various samples of hard cheese. Allison barely waited before he had set it down before grabbing up a drumstick and tearing off a hearty bite. He had seen the child eat at the wedding dinner, so he knew she had manners in her, but she seemed mainly inclined to stuffing her face whenever strangers were not about.

“You’ll choke,” he warned. She gave him a look that was thoroughly impolite before taking another bite. She shot a look at her father, who was again engaged in plundering through the sack, and, seeing he was otherwise occupied, opened her mouth and stuck out a tongue thoroughly coated in half masticated chicken. He snapped his teeth at her, which made her break into giggles which then *did* result in a coughing fit.

Chris re-emerged from the pouch at that, a wine bottle in one hand. He looked mildly concerned before deciding Allison had it well in hand and then went to work uncorking the wine. Allison had already moved on to a hunk of bread and cheese by the time he finished and had poured two tin cups full, and Peter himself was working on his own piece of chicken. He found he was *famished*, but unlike certain children, he knew how to eat with grace.

Chris stretched his legs out and leaned back beside Peter on his elbows, then passed Peter one of the cups of wine. Definitely not the correct glass for it, but Peter was too thirsty to quibble the point. Allison picked up the cup Chris had filled with canteen water and drank it, then held it out to Chris while pointedly looking at the bottle of wine.

“Ahem.” She said.

Chris looked between her and the cup and the wine bottle with one expressively risen eyebrow. Peter watched with interest. Perhaps a little more interest in Chris face than in Allison’s haughty pout, but who was keeping score, anyhow?

“You let me drink it at home,” Allison argued.

Which was indeed an excellent point. Peter mentally theater clapped as he finished his own glass. Cold was starting to set in again and the alcohol at least

let a little warmth spread back to his fingers. Without looking, Chris reached out and refilled his cup. Peter refused to find this the least bit impressive.

“With dinner. And watered down.”

Also true. Peter put a tick mark in Chris’ column. Today had been the first time he had truly had the opportunity to see father and daughter interact in any meaningful way, and he was pleased - for Allison’s sake, of course - to see that Chris kept none of the formality between them that Peter was used to seeing in families of the peerage. There was a warmth underlying every one of their interactions and Allison did not seem the least bit afraid, even when disagreeing or playing the brat. It loosed something in Peter’s chest to see that it was so.

“It’s cold. And I only want a little.”

“We’re heading back after we eat. You will be plenty warm then.”

Peter could see the wheels turning in Allison’s head. She and her father were two peas in a pod as far as stubbornness was concerned and he was secretly pleased she had yet to back down. He glanced at Chris and realized that his pressed lips were less a matter of irritation and more a matter of his attempt to keep from laughing when Allison was working so hard to be convincing. Chris was no pushover, but he certainly wasn’t the strict disciplinarian Peter’s father had been. Nor Gerard for that matter. Peter thinks he’s gathered that much, although everyone seems strangely mum on the subject of the King, especially in light of how much they liked to lecture him about everything else.

“Father.” Allison had her eyebrows raised as she began, sounding as if she were a professor lecturing his class at Oxford. “In only a few years, I shall be queen. And in fact, were something to happen to you even this year, you should expect that I would be trained well enough to take my place on the throne. Is this not true?”

Chris nodded gravely, but Peter could see crinkles at the corners of his eyes as he waited for Allison’s next words.

“How is it, then, that you expect me to be responsible enough to hold the kingdom in my hand, and yet still will not trust me with a single cup of wine?”

Chris reached out and gently pried the cup from Allison’s hand. “Allison, you

are still a child. And I will do everything I can to ensure you are able to remain one as long as possible. There is no joy in having to grow up before your time.”

Peter had stopped being a child at a very young age. He suspected that Chris had experienced the same, although likely not for the same reasons.

“But—!” Chris held up a hand and Allison’s mouth snapped shut. As much as Chris might give, once he chose to stand firm, he was an unmovable force, and Allison recognized he had reached that point.

“But,” he echoed his daughter, “you make a good point. Your work with Miss Marin is showing. For that, you may have one—” Allison made a distressingly shrill sound of joy, “—*one* cup of wine.” Chris poured the mug half full and then passed it back to Allison before eying the remnants of the food he had unpacked.

“And now, if we are finished, perhaps I might eat? I fear between the two of you, if I don’t start soon, there shall be nothing left!”

Peter gracefully caught the back of Chris’ ankle with the toe of his boot. Hard. And then pointedly returned to his chicken. Nothing left, indeed!

* * * * *

Deucalion did not join them for dinner. Peter, finally dressed again in dry, warm clothes, could not say he was disappointed. There would be ramifications for what happened at breakfast. Oh, not to Chris, of course. Deucalion was not foolish. But one way or the other, Peter would pay. The only joy to be found in that was that Chris clearly saw a slight to Peter as a slight to the Argent honor, so eventually Peter would still come out as winner.

By the end of the meal, Allison was falling asleep in her plate. Out of nowhere, Jill magically appeared and roused her off to bed. Left alone to their own devices, a comfortable silence fell between he and Chris as they sipped their brandy, one he was not, for once, inclined to break.

Finally, Chris stifled a yawn into the back of his hand. He put his snifter down. “Shall we?”

Shall we what, Peter was almost reckless enough to ask. *Shall we to bed? Shall we speak of what almost happened this morning?* At least what Peter was almost

sure happened this morning. *Shall we try again our wedding bed? When you undid me and I almost believed it mattered? Shall I invite you to unlock the door?*

In the end he said none of these things, but instead stood with his own stifled yawn. “I believe so.”

They walked together toward the stairwell, unhurried as Chris told him, in quiet amused tones, of the time he had caught Allison sneaking tumblers of whiskey from his study. And Peter thought there was some irony to be found in the fact that he was more comfortable in this foreign, icy place after a few weeks than he had ever been in his own home.

It was dangerous, was what it was, but tired and full and lulled into a false sense of security, he was having a hard time remembering that. At the bottom of the stairwell he stopped, putting his hand on Chris’ forearm.

“Christopher...”

There was the hurried click clack of shoes, and then some housemaid he had not yet met rounded the corner at a pace that screamed of urgency. She stopped at the far end of the hall, but as soon as Chris saw her, he left Peter and walked briskly to her side. They spoke urgently for several seconds, but so quietly Peter could not even make out the murmur of the words. In the end, Chris shook his head, said something more, and then she bowed and went back the way she came.

When Chris returned, everything about him had changed. His shoulders were stiff and his jaw was hard and that wall that had made Peter want to gnash and rend with his *teeth* the very first time he had stepped from the carriage was firmly back in place.

“Is something amiss?” he ventured.

“Hmm? Ah, no. I’m sorry, you were going to say something before we were interrupted?”

Peter shook his head as they started up the stairs. “It was of no import.”

“You are sure?”

Peter stopped at his door and let Chris pass him on his way to his own. “Yes.”

When Chris’ hand was on his door latch, Peter spoke again. “Do you need help with those?”

Chris turned to him, face befuddled. “Help with—?”

Peter gestured to his hands, still wrapped tight. “Your bandages. I’d hate to have Mistress McCall have to follow through on her threat.”

Chris smiled, but his thoughts were clearly a thousand miles away. “Ah, no, thank you. I can manage them myself.”

Peter had the feeling he was being summarily dismissed, and he tried not to let it sting. After all, why should it?

“Very well. Good night, prince.”

Chris’ attention snapped back to him, returning from wherever it had been, and he said quietly, “It’s Chris.” He did not let Peter respond, simply continued on in that same soft voice. “Good night, Peter. I shall see you on the morrow.” He bowed his head and in another moment Peter was listening to the quiet snick of his door closing behind him.

* * * * *

Chris did not see Peter at breakfast, because Chris’ breakfast was spent closeted with Deaton as they discussed reports from around the kingdom. And he did not see Peter at lunch, because at that point he was elbows deep in a meeting with Finstock, where Finstock pulled at his hair and swung his arms and ranted, and Chris spent as much time trying to calm him down as they did talking about details of the estate. It was not even that there was anything more wrong than usual. It was just how Finstock communicated. It was here that he learned of Deucalion’s unfortunate meeting with Jennifer and Kali’s seamstress, a woman who had a very bad habit of “accidentally” sticking pins into the flesh of those she considered offensive. And somehow, without ever meeting him, she had come to the conclusion that Deucalion decidedly was.

“Do you have any idea how such a thing happened?”

Finstock shrugged, perhaps as far away from innocent as anyone Chris had ever seen. "'Tis a mystery, sire. I shall caution the household staff against gossiping with our guests' staff."

"I'm sure you will," Chris said dryly. He had no doubt Deucalion had been subjected to any number of minor indignities by the staff over the past month, from food spills to smoking fires to delayed responses to calls. His staff did not take kindly to the maltreatment of those they considered under their care, and somehow Peter had been placed there almost immediately. The fact that neither Finstock, nor Deaton, nor Stilinski had seen fit to pass any of Deucalion's complaints along to him spoke just as loud.

Well, the man would be long gone before much longer, and until then Chris would just make sure he kept a civil tongue in his head.

At some point he felt sure he'd eaten. He had a fleeting memory of a tray of meats and cheeses being placed at his elbow as he'd poured over the household accounts, and as his belly was not rumbling, some part of it had to have made it to his mouth. He just did not remember the actual action. It was well into the afternoon when he finally parted from Finstock, a dull ache at his temples.

He could feel the itch under his skin, the need to move and breathe and *do*. He had never done well with remaining still, had always been more physical than brains. His hands and his feet...them he could trust to know what to do. It was why he was, at heart, a soldier, not a ruler. He wished his sister had not died so young. She would have worn the crown so much better than he.

Before he could crawl out of his skin, he strode from the palace and made his way to the stables. The door to his workshop was unbarred, which was strange enough, but he could also feel heat radiating from the cracks, which meant someone had fired up the coal stove that warmed the place.

He cautiously pushed the door open, hoping he wasn't going to find Allison and Scott had crept in. "Hello?"

Peter looked up from where he was leaned over a piece of paper, the end of a pencil stuck in his mouth. He was haloed by the lamp on the table, and for half a second something uncertain flashed across his face before it was eclipsed by his usual smirk. He drew the pencil from his mouth and marked something on Chris' blueprints, then straightened and said blandly,

“Christopher.” He had always hated the drawn out version of his Christian name, but his usual knee jerk reaction had been strangely absent of late. “You finally emerged.” Then the corner’s of Peter’s mouth turned down. “Your hands.”

Chris looked down and then guilty shoved said hands into his coat pockets. “I forgot.”

“I’ll just have to do it then.” The set of Peter’s jaw dared him to try to argue, but if he had to choose between Peter assigning himself the task and having to hear Melissa’s tongue lashing when Peter undoubtedly told on him, he would choose Peter’s hands every time.

“Very well.” He walked closer, eyebrows coming together. “What are you doing?”

There was that same uncertain look again, but then Peter shrugged, throwing down the pencil. “I wanted to see what you told me of. And then I saw these and I thought that maybe, if we changed this just a bit...laid these here...” He trailed off and stepped aside so that Chris could see his alterations. Perhaps he was silent too long as he studied the layout, because Peter started again. “Of course, it wouldn’t be an immediate fix, because we’d still have to find supplies...and really it would only work with the communal greenhouses, but—”

“My God,” Chris breathed, “this is brilliant.” He turned his head toward Peter. “How in the world could your family bear to let that mind go?”

Peter looked at him strangely. “What need did they have of me? They have Talia.”

“If that is true,” Chris said flatly, “then they are idiots.” He turned back to the plans, making calculations in his head. “We can start sending out for the pipes in spring. It might not be next winter, but at the very least by the next...” His words dropped off absently as he picked up the pencil and started incorporating Peter’s design into the plans.

“Where did you *come* from?” The sheer bewilderment in Peter’s words forced Chris’ attention back. Peter was staring at him like he was a cipher he couldn’t quite unlock.

Chris lowered his eyes in consternation. “If you listened to my father,” he said

lightly, fiddling with the pencil in his hand, “the weak side of my mother’s womb.”

“No,” Peter’s voice was low and serious. “I do not think so.”

“Ah...” Chris’ self consciousness threatened to overwhelm him, so he changed the subject to safer waters. “Did you get out to the fields to see the full sized ones?”

“No, not as of yet. These are the ones you helped build, yes?”

Peter merely looked curious, not judgmental, so Chris nodded. “Yes. I’ll take you to see them sometime soon if you’d like.”

“I would like. Very much.”

Chris’ lips tugged into a half smile and he nodded again. They lapsed into a small silence then, as Chris flipped through sheets to try to catch where Peter had added minor alterations, and Peter paced back and forth the length of the other side of the table. He kept shooting Chris short looks, his fingers tapping rapidly along the surface as he walked. Finally he stopped, directly across from Chris, and drew a deep breath.

“As we are in private, might I inquire about a personal matter?”

Chris put the pencil down and slowly straightened, hoping his voice gave no evidence to his suddenly racing heartbeat. “Yes, of course.”

“You were married.”

He looked like he expected some kind of response, so Chris dutifully nodded. “Yes.”

“And by all accounts were passionately in love with your late wife.” He stopped and then asked abruptly, “Is it true your marriage bed did not wait until the marriage?”

Chris started, then laughed. “Is that gossip still going about?” He paused. “It is true.” Then he looked down and smiled privately to himself. “We behaved very badly.” Plus, it had ensured Gerard would be unable to protest the wedding, not

that either of them had given much consideration to that factor at the time.

Peter cleared his throat and walked another few steps before spinning back around and continuing. "And yet, it did not seem too much of a hardship for you to make it through our wedding night. You wouldn't even let me blow out the lam--"

Chris cut in harshly. "There was no hardship."

Peter waved his hand dismissively. "Yes, yes, as you say. But you understand the question of the matter?"

In actuality it took Chris more than a few seconds of puzzling to indeed under the question of the matter. "Ah. I see." He shrugged one shoulder. "I find there is much to admire in both men *and* women." He had never considered it much past the first blush of confusion in puberty, nor had it come into play in his public life as Victoria had been his only real relationship. He supposed he could see the confusion.

"Both?"

"Yes. Lady Kali is created much the same. It has caused some of the more spectacular battles between she and Jennifer."

"Why?" Peter seemed stuck on one word answers, which was very unlike him.

"Jennifer occasionally becomes convinced Kali is going to run off with Ennis. Their steward," he added by way of explanation.

"I know who he is," Peter snapped irritably. "Is she?"

Chris rolled his eyes and leaned on his elbows on the table. "No. And Jennifer knows this." His forehead creased into a small frown. "Jennifer was betrayed by someone she trusted in when she was very young. It has left...baggage she has yet to be able to fully unpack. And Kali is hot tempered enough on her own. She cares for Jennifer enough to wade through it. But not always with grace."

"I see. And you? Do you have a lover tucked away somewhere near? It would be your right, I suppose. And not entirely unexpected." His words were nonchalant, almost cheerful, but he was looking at the wall directly behind Chris rather than

at his face.

“What?” Chris was entirely taken aback and couldn’t quite decide if he was insulted or not. “No. No! Why would you think I would— No.” He finished firmly.

“You cannot expect me to believe you have been celibate these many years.”

“Of course not! But I have never sought out a kept bedmate. And even if I had, I would never so disrespect my consort as to continue it under their nose! Why are we even having this conversation?”

“Hmm. No reason.” Peter ran his fingers across a measuring stick and then, maddeningly, infuriatingly, *changed the subject*. “Tell me about the Undead. They linger over everything here, and yet no one really speaks on them. And I feel sure anything we know in Genovia is little more than fairy tale and boogieman stories.”

“They’re not dead, for one thing,” Chris’ voice came out as a snap, but it was more remnant of his indignation rather than irritation at the question, so he forced his voice calmer. “Or undead, as the case may be. I suppose to our ancestors’ primitive minds, that was the only way they had to explain or understand their rabid behaviors.”

He took a deep breath. “Will you?” he asked softly. “Keep a lover?” He supposed Peter was right. Best to know from the beginning what he would need to allow. He fought against the sickness in his stomach. This was not the same as he and Victoria and no amount of pretending would make it otherwise.

Peter scoffed. “Please, Prince. As if you would let such an insult stand. I know my place.”

“And yet you think I should expect you to quietly put up with my supposed indiscretions? Why is it that I have the feeling you have placed one of us as the master and one as the mistress, and very unequal ones at that? We are both men.”

“I am well aware of where the balance of power lies in this relationship, Prince,” Peter shot back sourly. “I may as well be the woman in that!”

“There is no balance of power in this marriage!” Chris banged his fist against the

table in his frustration and a dozen pencils jumped and danced. “And so you are aware, any woman of Befastia would gut her husband with a knife over such disrespect! We are *not* the world you came from!”

“So I see,” Peter drolled. “Now, if the matter is settled, explain to me, Prince, if the Undead are not dead, what then are they?”

Chris stared at him, breath hissing through clenched teeth. “You are utterly, insanely, *infuriating*! And my *name* is *Chris*.”

“Fine, then. *Christopher*, if they are not supernatural, then how do you explain the way they will not die unless their heads are removed? I will assume *that* rumor, at the least, is true. How do you explain how they infect a man with just one bite?”

Chris tried, he really did, but the fascination he felt with the subject overrode his desire to grab Peter by the shoulders and *shake* him until he actually *listened* to the words coming from Chris’ mouth. Or kiss him. Chris might actually have liked to do both, but he hadn’t been invited, and now the moment was gone.

“But you see,” he started excitedly, “that’s just the word. *Infected*. We can’t be sure, because we’ve never been able to take one alive, and they tend to reclaim their dead, but the bits and pieces we’ve found...they show no signs of necrotization or anything else that would indicate a previous death. There is a kind of degeneration, though, in the muscle tissue.

“Melissa thinks it is a *disease*. One that heightens aggression and appetite, but also healing. Even changes physical appearance over time. It would account for the rictus, for the elongated teeth and limbs and nails.

“A disease,” Peter said.

“Yes! Or..or...even a creature.” His hands gestured emphatically to emphasize his point.

“A creature.” Chris could hear the dubiousness practically dripping from the words.

“Yes! Like a...a parasite.” This was the theory Chris believed most. “One that attaches to a host’s body and uses it to survive. Changes it even. Like a leech

keeps a wound from healing over in order to continue to feed. The preternatural healing would simply be a side effect of its survival instinct! And disease or creature, perhaps it goes into hibernation during summer. It would explain why the attacks only come in the winter and why fire kills the Undead the same as beheading.”

“But how do you explain the organization? Or the fact they are clothed and armed? That does not speak to disease. Society *roots out* disease, Christopher, it does not encourage it.”

“Only if they know it is there! We have been battling Lucien for four hundred years now. For all we know it’s endemic to their population. Whatever that is. But you’re missing the point. If we can find a cure, we can stop them. Or at least save our own wounded!” There was nothing quite so horrifying as watching a soldier commit ritual suicide rather than surrender to encroaching madness. Infection was quick; the longest he had seen between bite and change had been three hours, and that had been Victoria. She had managed to hold out until reinforcements had arrived to secure the palace, but he put that more to the sheer power of her will than anything physiological. Most soldiers were not nearly so strong of mind. For a moment he was in danger of losing himself to memories of her blood splayed across the stone of the west wing, but Peter, thank God, jerked him out of it.

“Surely you’ve sent scouting parties. Surely you have some idea of what’s happening on the other side! For God’s sake, you know their leader’s name!”

“Of course we sent scouting parties! There are records and records of scouting parties being sent!” It was hard for him to remember at times that this was not something the whole world lived with all the time. That Peter had every right not to know the details. “And none of them ever came back! Eventually my ancestors decided it wasn’t worth the sacrifice. Nothing has convinced me that they were wrong.”

“But you’ve had communication...?” Peter trailed off when Chris shook his head.

“No. Unless you consider hacking one another to bits communication.”

“But how—”

“We don’t know, Peter.” He rubbed his hand over his face tiredly, then winced as the pain in it flared. “So much of what we do is just desperate, blind defense. We call whoever directs them Lucien simply because that was the only name that we ever had, when we first settled here. It’s a shadow name, because we have to call him something.”

“How do you know it is not a woman?”

“We don’t. Although we have never encountered a female among the Undead. Not in four hundred years of recorded history.”

“Well, they have to breed somehow if they are not supernatural!”

“I *know*.” Chris shoved his hands back into his coat pockets. “I am well aware we are flinging about in the dark! But I think we manage rather well, seeing as how the continent still stands!”

“For God’s sake, Christopher, I am not criticizing! You think I could live here even this short of time and not see how incredible your accomplishments are? What your people have done? Sacrificed? I’m just trying to understand so I can *help*. My people now, right? Is that not what you said? My survival is intricately tied to theirs in the most intimate way, and I don’t know about you, but I *prefer not to die*.”

“There is no reason to fear death,” Chris said mulishly.

Peter narrowed his eyes at him for a long moment then wordlessly picked up a pencil and flung it at his head. Chris caught it just before it struck, then let it drop to the table. He gave a long sigh, letting all the fight flow out of him.

“You are right. I am sometimes...overly defensive.”

“Sometimes?”

Chris let the jibe pass. “I intend us to do more than survive. I am weary of watching our sons and daughters die because our ancestors merely did what *worked*. It is why Melissa’s work is so important. It is why we are developing new weapons. It is why we are developing more ways to *live*. I am not as content with the stalemate as my forefathers were.”

“Good,” Peter said emphatically. “Christopher, you need to get eyes over the mountains.”

He sighed and nodded. “I know. But it has to be more than just throwing lives away. We have to be better equipped.” And as of now he had yet to figure out a way to accomplish that.

Peter stepped close and put a cautious hand on Chris’ shoulder. The heat of it sank through his coat and into his skin and Chris gave himself the luxury of soaking it in. “Let me help, Chris. If you cannot trust me with strategy, at least let me be your ear. Let me help carry the weight.”

He did not know if he could do it. The weight of the country and its fate had been his to bear for so long that he didn’t know *how* to do it. Everything he did rested on the control he kept over himself and his emotions and his actions. But if he rejected this, he feared Peter would take it as a rejection of *him*, and any hopes he had for something other than this cautious detente between them would be dashed.

Slowly, carefully, he placed his hand over Peter’s and bowed his head. “Thank you. I would be very grateful for that.”

He thought perhaps Peter had not expected that, because a startled, brilliant smile broke out on his face and Chris was blindsided anew. Peter quickly reined it in to a more dignified stance, cleared his throat and reclaimed his hand. Chris felt the loss keenly but wasn’t brave enough to reach out to reclaim it.

Peter stepped back, tongue sweeping over his bottom lip. “Ahem.” He seemed to search for something to fill the space. “Have you seen Allison? Chit disappeared after breakfast and I haven’t seen her since.”

Chris was busy trying to puzzle out the cause of Peter’s discomfort and so said without much thought, “Probably hiding somewhere with Scott.”

Peter startled, and then his eyes narrowed. “You know.”

Peter’s lack of surprise was telling. “As did you. Were you ever going to tell me?”

“If the need had arisen. I have been keeping an eye on them. The boy has done

nothing untoward. Other than reaching beyond his station.”

Chris waved his hand and turned to put out the stove. They were done here for now and unattended fires were too much of a hazard so close to the stables. “You need not worry about setting a watch. I have been lining Stiles’ pockets for a year now to keep me informed.”

“Stilinski’s son? I thought he was their friend?”

“Oh, he is. He is also opportunistic and vying for an apprenticeship with Deaton. Once he was assured I had no intentions of punishing Scott, he was easily enough bought.”

Peter put the lamp out, and the room descended to a dusk lit only by gloomy light coming through the small, high windows. “What will you do?”

“Do?”

“To stop it.”

“I’m not sure what there is to do. In a few short years Allison will be queen. She will choose what she will choose.”

Peter gave him a look that spoke volumes. “Don’t be ingenuous. There are a million and one things a guardian can do to stop an unsuitable match, with barely a finger lift. You could terminate his father. Send them to another district. Draft Scott into service and send him to the front of the pass. If you balk at such bloody measures, have the boy sent to the continent to fetch supplies. She will have moved on before he ever comes back, especially should you have carefully selected suitors already prepared for the gap.”

Chris tucked his hands behind his back and stood beside Peter, looking out through the now open door at the stable’s courtyard. “I suppose you’re right. There are several eligible families with sons. Or I could send out for a match.” He side eyed Peter with a small grin. “With a few carefully worded caveats, this time. And I did consider such things when I first discovered the attachment. But what good would it serve? The boy isn’t trying to ruin her.” His face darkened. “Should that change, we will revisit our options. But, as of now... If I send him away, Allison will know why. She will be just as likely to rebel as to acquiesce. And they are young. She may outgrow him, or he, her. And if they do not,” he

shrugged, “she could do worse. Scott is honest and kind and a hard worker. He would treat her well. The only thing he lacks is training, and that can be given.

“It is easier to rise on your merits here, when so much of survival depends upon them.”

“Hmm.” Peter’s look was weighing. “And so the stable boy will marry the princess. Christopher Argent, dispenser of fairy tales.”

“You think it unwise?”

Peter shook his head. “I think it unusual. Which is not necessarily the same thing. Come,” he hooked his arm through Chris’ and started them back toward the palace. “Cook has assured me she has procured pheasant for supper.”

* * * * *

Chapter 7

Peter took a deep breath and knocked on the door to Chris' outer rooms.

Chris' muffled voice came through the wood. "Enter."

Peter pushed the door open. Chris was seated on one end of a settee by the fire, an open book in his lap. It was a strangely endearing picture, Chris with his jacket and waistcoat off, feet bare and one leg bent at an angle with foot tucked against the inside of his thigh. Peter stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

"Peter." Chris didn't look displeased to see him, merely confused, so Peter pointed to the jar of salve and bandages sitting abandoned on the small buffet table.

"I'm here for your hands."

"Oh. Of course." Something flickered in Chris' eyes before disappearing, replaced by that carefully cultivated blank look that simply begged Peter to poke and prod and claw at it until it fell to shreds.

Instead he pulled the empty crystal decanter from behind his back and held it out. "And I'm out of brandy. I thought we could do a fair trade."

Chris snorted out a laugh and rolled his eyes, but the blank look was gone, filtered out by something lighter. "Sounds like a good business deal. Come. Sit." He waved to the empty side of the settee. "Excuse my undress; I had forgotten you were coming."

Peter set the decanter on the side table and traded it for the bandages and salve. He gestured at his own lack of jacket and cravat as he sat. "I think we are equal here. What are you reading?"

Chris colored slightly. "*The Rosicrucian*. You probably wouldn't—"

"Shelley, yes?"

Chris' blush deepened. "Yes. I know it's tawdry trash, but Jennifer brought it

back from her last trip to the continent and —”

“And you can’t put it down?”

Chris sighed in defeat. “Yes. It’s so *awful*. And yet I cannot turn the pages fast enough to see what new depravity the man will think of next.”

Chris’ flustered state was too amusing for Peter to even think of admitting he had a copy of the self same book packed away in his trunk. “At least we know where Allison got her tastes from.”

Chris’ nose wrinkled. “She’s fascinated by the horrors, even though they give her nightmares. I blame Scott.”

“Well,” Peter sniffed pointedly, “I did give you numerous suggestions to solve that issue. Now. Give me your hands.”

He ran his thumbs over the soft inner flesh of Chris’ palms, letting heat trickle through him as he relived the feel of those hands trailing down his chest, digging hard into his buttocks, cradling his cheek as Chris nosed his way up his jaw and teethed at his lobe. He felt the ghost remembrance of the slow drag of Chris’ fingers up his spine two mornings ago and how hard he had fought not to arch wantonly into that touch.

He drew in a shaky breath and refused to meet Chris’ eyes as he efficiently spread salve over the worst of the cracks and bound them. When he was done, Chris flexed his hands experimentally.

“This is well done. Better than Melissa’s, I think. But keep that between us; I’ll need her to stitch me up again one day.”

Peter acknowledged the compliment with a small nod. “I have bandaged my share of split knuckles.”

“Did you box then? At the gentleman’s club?”

Peter’s smile was brief and humorless. “Close enough.” He was not about to tell Chris that despite the elevation of his family’s name, Peter was refused membership to any reputable gentleman’s association. That his injuries came from alleyway brawls where he was like as not fighting for his life and not for a

hurrah and gentleman's points.

"Now," he stood and went back to the liquor and poured two glass snifters full. "A reward for your good behavior."

Their fingers brushed as he handed Chris the brandy, and when he sat he found he had somehow closed the space between them enough so that polite distance had been breeched. Chris did not move to reopen it, and Peter refused to blink first.

Chris' eyes were dark and unreadable as he raised the snifter and drank, and when a drop escaped to the plump of his bottom lip, his tongue flicked out to catch it back. His voice changed again, dropping low and smoky. "It pleases me that my husband finds me worthy of reward."

Peter's breath caught in his throat at the insinuation, the first since the wedding, when Chris had set out to deliberately seduce him into ease. Since then Chris seemed more interested in apologizing any time it might even *look* like he wanted Peter for just himself, not a task to be checked off and fulfilled. The idea of it crawled up Peter's spine, that perhaps Chris would prefer him not to leave once the brandy was done.

He took a sip to cover the quickening of his breath, and Chris' eyes tracked every move, predatory in a way that had been absent since the marriage bed. Peter had begun to wonder if he had simply imagined it, but now, caught under its full weight, he knew his imagination could never be that good.

"Prince," he said quietly, "you are staring."

"Yes," he answered without shame, not dropping his gaze. His hand rested against the back of the settee, close enough to Peter's face that if he moved just one inch, he could touch, and yet he stayed stubbornly still. "Would you like me to stop?" Although the words were a question, his tone was not.

These were not waters Peter was equipped to tread, these subtle flirtations that required Peter to reveal rather than conceal, where Chris seemed unwilling to advance unless Peter lead. Whatever Chris' suppositions, and whatever the abuses his father heaped upon him, the two of them had grown up in radically different environments. But Peter was also utterly certain that Chris would not advance even that one inch unless he knew he was welcome.

“No,” Peter said lightly. “Although you appear to be considering the best way to devour.”

Chris’ smile was a slow burn. “Yes.”

“And yet, you do not reach out to take.”

“I will not go where I am not wanted.”

Peter looked down, toyed with his glass, and then at Chris through his lashes. “And if you were wanted?”

Chris inhaled a sharp breath, the fingers holding his snifter tightening to the point the tips when white. His eyes searched Peter’s face before he said in a rough growl, “Then I would *take*.”

“I see.” Peter gave a sharp nod and stood. It was disturbing, in those few seconds, to watch that careful blankness creep back over Chris’ face, until everything that had been so revealed before was completely gone. For the first time it occurred to him that this might be hard for *Chris*, that it might be hard for so naturally a reticent man to expose himself so openly and without safety nets. There was a small dose of guilt with that, along with an entirely inappropriate shiver at the confirmation of the fires that must roar beneath Chris’ carefully controlled, staid surface.

Peter set his glass down and held his hand out, palm up, in a move reminiscent of Chris’ stance when he had first offered Peter a choice. There was confusion on Chris’ face now, which was better than the blankness as far as Peter was concerned, but he would have both looks stripped away.

“Christopher. I would have you *take*.”

Everything hung motionless from one heartbeat to the next, and then Chris surged up, letting his glass carelessly fall and shatter against the floor. His hands were on Peter’s face, the back of his neck, spanning his skull and thumbing his jaw open so that there was no resistance when he covered Peter’s mouth with his own and swept his tongue inside.

Not that Peter wanted there to be. He gripped the front of Chris’ shirt, yanking at the laces until they were undone and then ripping the shirt over his head. Chris

made an angry, frustrated sound when it necessitated he remove his mouth from Peter's, and as soon the shirt was off his arms he flung it to the side and returned to scrape his teeth over Peter's bottom lip. There was no gentle ease in Chris' touch, no soft seduction. It was raw and desperate, and Peter *reveled* in it.

"I thought of this for days." Chris pressed the words into Peter's jaw, along the shell of his ear, as he worked at the buttons of his trousers. His knuckles pressed against Peter's erection through the cloth, and Peter felt his lips curve into a grin against his skin when Peter groaned and bucked into the friction.

"Thought of this for days," he said again. "Up on the mountain, freezing to death at night and wondering if I would see home again or if tomorrow would be the day we would die." He slid his hand inside Peter's small clothes and wrapped around him, not nearly as awkward with the bandages as Peter had thought he would be. Peter's eyes fell shut as he began to stroke him, as his voice continued to gravel in his ear. "You can hear them, you know. The soldiers. Fucking, fighting, whispering to each other in the dark and the cold. And I thought of the heat of you, and the feel of you, and the sound of you. I came on my hand with your name on my lips."

At the moment, Chris' voice was the deadliest weapon Peter could imagine, stripping him bare and defenseless and making small noises scrape at the back of his throat. He rallied his sanity and pulled back to place his fingers over Chris' mouth.

"Shut up and take me to bed."

Chris' expression turned smug. He parted his lips so that Peter's fingers slipped inside the warm well of his mouth, where his tongue wrapped around them and drew them deeper. Then he closed his lips again and *sucked*, the gentle tug-release-tug shooting straight through Peter's fingers and down to where his cock pulsed and leapt in Chris grip. His mouth fell open as all the air rushed from his lungs in a startled groan. Chris kept their eyes locked, giving Peter no where to escape and then slowly dragged his fingers from his mouth with a small 'pop.'

"I'll take you to bed, because I need one for the things we are going to do, but I do not think I'll shut up. You like the words too much for me to do such a thing."

He nipped under Peter's jaw, leaving a mark that would bruise. "Don't you?"

Peter let his head fall to the side in a silent request for more, and this time Chris' bite was harder, more teeth and less lip. "*Don't* you, Peter?"

Peter capitulated, scraping his nails up the back of Chris neck and digging them in just a shade too hard. This time it was Chris who groaned, his hand tightening spasmodically around Peter's cock.

"Yes," Peter confessed, jerking Chris' face back to his so he could eat at his mouth again. Peter feasted, but Chris *devoured*, sweeping his tongue into Peter's mouth and delving thoroughly, leaving no corner untasted as they stumbled through the room, knocking over chairs and shedding articles of clothing as they went.

They were both nude by the time they made it through the bedroom door, their progress impeded by Chris' refusal to keep his hands from kneading at the firm globes of Peter's posterior, making walking difficult, and from Peter's inability to keep his mouth from Chris' skin.

Chris' bed was unmade, as if he had tried to find sleep, only to toss and turn before giving up and picking up his book. Peter selfishly hoped he had been the reason Chris had been unable to find rest.

If it had been up to Chris, Peter doubted they would have ever made it to the bed. He was liable to lose his patience in their fumbling and have them rutting right here on the rug. And while Peter was not *against* that, at least in theory, he still remembered the lingering soreness from their last rut. The last thing he wanted to do was add rug burned knees into that combination. So he reluctantly ducked out of Chris' arms and scrambled up on the bed.

He scooted back toward the headboard and was just turning to his stomach when a hand closed around his ankle.

"Don't." Chris' voice was low and entreating. "Please."

Peter returned to his back and pushed himself up on his elbows. Chris was on his knees at the foot of the bed, eyes dark and so full of need and desire that Peter almost wanted to throw an arm over his eyes to hide from its full weight.

"Please don't," Chris urged again. "I want to be able to see you."

If Peter had felt exposed before, he felt doubly so now. Chris was staring at him like some men stared at the cross or the altar. It had never been intended for anyone to look at him in that way, and Peter both craved it and felt ashamed for the craving. If Chris had any idea what he was truly looking at, at the filth and darkness beneath Peter's skin, he would not care so much if Peter hid his face and became just another body in which to slake his lust.

In the end, though, Peter was, as always, too selfish not to clutch at what Chris was offering.

"I think you can see me well enough no matter which way I lie," he said archly, but half smiled to give lie to the barb. "However," he continued graciously, "if you promise to do that thing with your tongue, I suppose I can be convinced."

A slow, sinuous smile spread across Chris' face, and a smug, dark confidence took the place of any uncertainty that might have been there as he waited for Peter's answer. "Which thing in particular?" He bent and pressed an open mouth to the inside of either of Peter's ankles, then began a slow crawl up the bed, pushing Peter's legs up and apart as he went. "It has many skills." He flicked said tongue across the inside of Peter's knees, and then his thighs, and then cast his eyes at Peter's face. "For instance--" his breath was hot along the length of Peter's cock and Peter felt his balls draw up in anticipation. Surely he didn't mean to —

"—there is this." And Peter was left gurgling out a whine as Chris bowed his head and ran his tongue up the length of Peter's cock.

"And there is this." Chris circled his tongue around the head of Peter's cock, and dipped it into the slit. Then, just as he had done with Peter's fingers, his parted his lips and let Peter's cock slip into the warm, wet cavern of his mouth.

"*God!*" Peter fisted his hands in the bed sheet, the suction of Chris' mouth threatening to undo him all together. The sensation was too good, too delicious, and it had his toes curling and his eyes threatening to close. Most of him wanted to just let his head fall back so he could revel completely in the sensory experience, but he couldn't take his eyes off of Chris, on his knees. Just for Peter.

It wasn't that Peter had never had his cock sucked, from pretty street boys for a few coins, or more commonly, from Madam Johnson's stable in the red district.

Even from a few skilled maids, once he had figured out a mouth was a mouth and he could imagine whomever he liked with his eyes closed. But everything he had been raised to know of class and breeding and the aristocracy led him to understand one thing: royalty went to their knees for no one.

Beneath the pleasure, beneath the sheer *need need need* Chris' mouth had pounding through his veins was the same confusion and semi-horror he had felt when Chris had done similarly that first night, and that had been only to remove Peter's *boots*. To do *this*, what was generally the task of whores because even a man's wife could not be expected to debase herself so—

But Chris did not look debased, and Chris had not even hesitated, and Chris looked every bit as confident with Peter's cock in his mouth and his cheeks hollowed out as he had standing on the dais greeting all the lords and ladies of his country. Except he had not looked quite so enraptured on that occasion, lashes fluttering shut with every dip of his head and expression giving every indication he actually *enjoyed* what he was doing. And Peter was again left with the feeling that somehow he had been missing out —

Then Chris did *something* with his stupidly talented mouth and Peter lost every bit of his train of thought as his head fell back and his eyes rolled back and absolutely *embarrassing* sounds fell from his lips.

“*Christopher!*” His hand found its way to Chris' face, feeling the dip where his cheeks hollowed out and tracing shakily through it before carding into his hair. He was going to come before they even started at this rate. When Chris suddenly pulled off with a self satisfied smirk, Peter realized he had spoken that last bit out loud.

“Can't have that happening, can we?” He buried his face in Peter's thigh and groaned deep before sliding the rest of the way up Peter's body until they were face to face and their legs mingled together. Chris' erection was pressed into the divot of Peter's hip, and when Peter arched up into the weight of Chris' body, he got the gratifying reaction of Chris making a guttural noise from his chest and nipping light at Peter's bottom lip. He was beginning to suspicion Chris was rather fond of his mouth.

“And yes,” Chris graveled against his mouth, hand going to Peter's hip and anchoring it securely. “I will do *that thing* with my tongue. Eventually. But I

have other things in mind, first.”

And then Chris commenced to taking Peter apart piece by piece, proving that Peter’s memories of that first night had indeed not been overblown, and that they had also been only the tip of the iceberg of what worked inside of Chris. He left Peter nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and he kept *looking at him*. Running his hands over Peter’s body and watching his face to see what his reactions were to *just this twist* of Chris’ fingers. Plucking Peter’s nipples between his teeth until they were swollen and aching and so incredibly sensitive that just Chris’ breath across them had Peter twisting and digging his nails into Chris’ shoulders. And all the while Chris’ eyes kept returning to his face, kept gauging his response.

Peter was certain he would feel self conscious at the scrutiny - at what he might be revealing, at what Chris might be seeing on his face - if not for the fact that every his need to find one mask or the other threatened to creep in, Chris would employ his mouth or his hands or his body in some way or the other that made it entirely impossible for Peter to fully grasp hold of the notion.

If Chris approached warfare with the same ferocious intent he employed on Peter’s body, Peter had no doubt as to why the Undead had been held for so many years at the pass.

At one point Chris pushed back on his elbows, eyes burning in their intensity as he studied Peter with that same, worshipful look as earlier, like he thought Peter was something *holy*. Peter could only bear it for a moment before he looked away, looked over Chris shoulder and then surged up to suck at the tendon of his neck to distract him. Chris groaned and shuddered and cupped the back of Peter’s neck with his palm.

“You are perfect, Peter,” he whispered against the shell of his ear.

And then he was back between Peter’s thighs, fulfilling his word as he tongued and pressed and stretched Peter apart until Peter was helpless to do anything more than rut into his face and hands and plead for more.

“Please, please, *please*.” He heard his voice but it was very far away. Recognized it as his but shied away from the shameless need in it. He needed *no one*. His mouth apparently rebelled at that notion just as much as his body did. “Chris, please...I want...I want...”

Chris' fingers pulled from his body with a lewd squelching sound and Peter was suddenly left empty and open and aching to be filled again. Chris stroked his thigh and whispered *shhhh*, which was when Peter realized the pained, desperate whine he'd heard was coming from his own mouth.

"It's okay, Peter. Just another second. It won't be long." Chris sat back on his haunches and slicked his cock up with another palmful of the oil he had used on Peter, looking fairly desperate himself. *That* Peter smugly soaked in, the fact that Chris couldn't stop touching him, looked like he was wholly famished for the feast that only Peter's body could give. At that moment Chris looked like he would crawl on hands and knees to the ends of the earth just for the chance to sink into him. Peter stretched his hands over his head and gave an experimental arch, putting his body fully on display. Though he hadn't thought it possible, Chris' pupils blew even wider, until there was barely any sea-green left to be seen, and the tether of control Peter had not been aware Chris had been so barely clinging to snapped in two.

Chris' teeth bared in a ferocious grin; he gripped Peter's ass in both hands and dragged him forward until his legs were splayed on either side of Chris and his torso was wholly supported by his thighs. He thumbed Peter's cheeks apart until the head of his cock pressed and caught against the rim of Peter's hole and his grin only widened as Peter clenched and twisted without thought, anticipating what was coming.

Unlike last time, Chris did not ease in, inch by teasing inch. Instead he gripped Peter's thigh in one hand, the base of his cock in the other, and then, between one breath and the next, pushed in all at once.

Peter arched like a bow, a wordless sound escaping his mouth as his body warred between the need to scramble closer and the need to push away and his channel clenched repetitively around Chris. He scrabbled at the bedsheets yet again, unable to find real purchase in the position he was suspended in.

Chris withdrew and thrust in again, and again Peter's body bowed in reaction, his cock slapping sharply against his stomach. Chris' hands were a welcome anchor where they pressed into his hips, and the next time he drove inside, Peter braced his hands against the headboard and pushed back to meet him, feeling pleasure shiver and spark as the momentary, too full, feeling of panic finally gave over to heady, debaucherous need. Then, Chris heaved his hips higher, and

when he thrust again, his cock found Peter's prostate.

Peter cried out, his length leaping at the shock of pleasure, and Chris' face lit with a fierce joy. He continued to thrust, unerringly finding Peter's prostate each time now, and his arms began to grow tense and tremble as he drove Peter closer and closer to the edge.

"I could lose myself in you, Peter. I could lose myself in how tight you grip about me. Could let the whole kingdom fall and not care as long as I was buried inside you." Peter twisted his hips in response, and Chris shivered, an entirely wounded sound falling from his lips.

"Touch yourself, Peter," he whispered raggedly, although the command in his voice was unmistakable, "let me see you fall apart."

Peter hand was already closed about his cock before the thought of disobeying even entered his mind. Chris was watching him raptly, chest heaving in and out as his thrusts continued to punch gasps of pleasure from Peter's lungs, and all at once that feeling of *too much, too much* came rushing back. He froze, caught between extremes.

Almost immediately, Chris' brows drew together, and then his motion slowed, then stopped. Peter, so close to the brink, was unable to stifle the whine of distress that followed, and Chris expression softened.

"Peter," he said, then stopped. He turned his head and traced his tongue over the inside of Peter's knee, then inhaled deep before facing him again. "Peter." His hips resumed their motion and Peter jerked at his cock on instinct, chasing the orgasm that was just beyond reach.

"That's it," Chris crooned, his tongue sweeping over his bottom lip. "So good. So good, Peter." He thrust faster, harder, and Peter's hand sped up in tandem, jerking rough and greedy. He wasn't sure which he was chasing more now, his orgasm, or the blatant approval in Chris' voice and face, and he no longer cared, caught between rutting his hand and rutting Chris' cock and trapped in the tunnel vision of Chris' gaze. Everything gathered to a pinpoint of pleasure, drew tighter and tighter, and then, in the blink of an eye, ecstasy exploded at lightening speed through every limb in his body.

He spasmed, coming in thick spurts over his hand and chest and belly. He

clenched tight around Chris as he did, a hoarse shout spilling from his throat. Chris next thrust was violent and deep, tendons stark as his mouth fell open in a silent cry. His eyes never left Peter's face as he climaxed, and Peter could not look away either, even as he felt the warmth of Chris' seed filling his body.

A long moment passed and then Chris lifted Peter's hand from his cock to Chris' mouth. He pressed his lips to Peter's palm, ignoring or not caring about the semen coating it. He seemed about to say something, but in the end just kissed Peter's palm again and then laid it to rest gently against the blankets.

As before, Peter immediately felt the odd, empty loss the minute Chris withdrew. And as before, Chris did not leave him to his own devices, but instead fetched a damp rag from the wash basin and carefully cleaned the both of their bodies. When finished, he brushed his hand up the length of Peter's spine and then collapsed on his back beside him.

Peter remembered the previous night, when Chris had withdrawn to his own chambers just as soon as the deed was sealed. He could feel the ache beginning to settle in, and exhaustion right on its heels, and while all he really wanted to do was curl up on Chris' ridiculously comfortable mattress and never move again, he thought it best to follow Chris' example.

He stretched and groaned in a mixture of pleasure and well earned soreness, and then rolled to a sitting position.

"Stay."

Peter jerked, startled, then turned back to face Chris.

"Stay," Chris repeated, and it was here, rather than at any of the things they had just done, that the prince looked uncertain. "I know it is not done —" He cut off and pressed his lips together and then started again. "If you prefer to go, I would not keep you. But if you will, I would have you stay."

Peter raised one eyebrow, feeling some sense of equilibrium return. His lips curled up in a half smirk. "But I have no bed clothes, sire."

Chris' nose crinkled pleasingly, and while his face remained grave, his eyes smiled. "I would hate you to feel under dressed, prince consort. It would only be fair for me, as your host, to leave off with bed clothes as well."

“In that case, then,” Peter sniffed imperiously, “I shall stay.”

Chris bowed his head, but Peter could see the smile he hid. It struck him how very little it took to make Chris happy. It was foreign to Peter’s upbringing and he wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. He raised a hesitant hand but then let it drop before following through with the motion.

Chris looked back up and said loftily, “In that case, one of us should get the lamps.”

Peter stuck his nose into the air. “I, sire, am the *guest*.” Then he crawled under the blankets and tucked them about him with finality. Chris barked out a laugh and shook his head in amusement as he climbed from the bed to take care of the task.

When he came back, he settled on the bed and blew out the final bedside lamp before crawling under the covers. They lay there, an awkward, careful space between them, and then Chris gave a small sigh, turned on his side, and pulled Peter into a spoon against him. Excepting the other night, which had been more about Chris’ survival than intimacy, Peter had not slept with another human being since he was in leading strings. It was very long moments before the stiffness left his body and he was able to relax into Chris’ arms. Even then, it took Chris mumbling sleepily into his neck for him to “stop thinking and go to sleep,” for him to finally let his eyes close. His final thought before sleep claimed him was to wonder exactly how scandalized the servants would be when they came to put out the fire.

Chapter 8

Peter ducked and swung his sword upward, nearly slicing Chris under the arm before he managed to twist and parry down, catching Peter's sword crosswise. The blow rang loud, echoing across the near empty training yard. As they stepped back to catch their breath, whooping cheers came from the stone fence, where Allison, Scott, and Stiles sat across the ledge, with Kali and Jennifer taking up a more dignified stance, leaning against one end.

"Well done, Father!" Allison crowed, clapping enthusiastically. Then she caught herself and smiled kindly at Peter. "You, too, Peter! You have very much improved!"

Peter waved her off with a rueful grin. "Don't give me your false platitudes, beastie. Congratulate me when I've actually won something!"

Chris wiped the sweat from his forehead with his forearm and then clapped his hand on Peter's shoulder. "She's right, you know. You were very close to taking me under. And that is no false compliment." They had been working like this every day for the past few weeks, both to get the much needed exercise that sometimes stagnated over the icy winter months, as well as for Chris to settle in his own mind the reports he'd gotten from Captain Stilinski as to Peter's ability to protect himself.

"It's the sword." Peter made a face as he had every day, and hefted the old fashioned broad sword in a small arc. "If we were at rapiers, then we would see who was the master."

It was not an empty boast, although Peter, as usual, made it sound as if it were. He had seen a demonstration of Peter's fencing skills, and they were beyond formidable.

"Yes, and if Lucien's men could be skewered through —"

"But they cannot." Peter finished off the conversation that had been repeated often. "Which makes my talents near useless. And so I am stuck with this beast, and learning how to sever heads and limbs."

"You protest, prince consort, and yet you have nearly mastered what some never

learn. Once you stop fighting against the weight, and let here,” he brushed his thumb across Peter’s temple, “finish rewiring the habits of here,” he moved in close to guard the motion from prying eyes as he played his fingers familiarly down Peter’s arm, “you will be fine.”

He let his hand linger for a moment longer than necessary, a moment longer than proper. Peter’s smirk softened, became something more promising, but when Chris was required by politeness to remove his hand, Peter made no move to follow. Chris was careful not to let his disappointment show as Peter sheathed his sword and gestured to their small audience.

“Shows over, little bratlings. Time for warm fires and hot drinks before we all catch pneumonia.” He sneered good naturedly at Jennifer and Kali, who had somehow yet to find their way back to their own homes. The three of them had formed something of a congenial antagonistic relationship, which was to say the two women liked him about as well as they liked anyone. “And I suppose you may come as well.”

Peter waited just long enough to see that the children were following his orders and then turned to follow Chris into the armory to stow their weapons and shields. In the few weeks since Chris’ return, Peter had slowly stopped looking startled and suspicious when Chris sought him out or randomly touched him, had slowly started to lose the initial wary, biting set to his features whenever a new topic of conversation began between them.

Chris was grateful for this in ways he couldn’t explain, and he felt sure it was progress, but it had not escaped his notice that while Peter did not seem bothered by the contact, he also never initiated it. With Allison, Peter was free with both affection and smiles, but with Chris there existed a wall he could not seem to climb. He might be willing to be Chris’ ear, but he refused to allow Chris to do the same.

At least during the day.

At night...at night Peter still came to his room, long after the excuse of Chris’ bandages had passed. At night Peter reached for him and whispered to him and let Chris trace unspeakable words across his skin. At night Peter came apart for him, again and again.

And Chris knew he should be happy with this. Be happy Peter at least seemed

content with Befastia, at least seemed to have become attached to its people and survival. At least no longer seemed miserable. But as the days passed, as he uncovered bit by bit the brilliance, the biting humor, and the compassion Peter not only hid but seemed *ashamed* to harbor, he found himself greedily wanting more. Wanting Peter to *want* to stay, to *want* the bonds that now bound them. To want Chris for more than a bedmate.

Talia's caution of *patience* ran through his mind, and he sighed as he hung his sword and sheath on their hook. He could read enough between the lines to know that something in Peter had been damaged, and as much as he might wish to immediately root it out and repair it, he knew enough of damaged souls to know nothing was ever so simple. Peter had to trust him, and he had no indication that was so.

"Did I wear you out, then?"

He turned to find Peter watching him inquisitively, and realized he had been woolgathering for far too long.

"I apologize. The news from the pass came this morning." Minutes after Peter had slipped wordlessly from his bed. Some mornings he would linger - and those days were among Chris' favorites - but more often than not he would disappear at first light, only to appear dressed and groomed and congenially distant at the breakfast table.

The teasing light in Peter's eyes snuffed out instantly, immediately replaced with concern. "And? How goes it?"

Chris smiled grimly and planted his hands flat on the table. "They hold, as always. And Lieutenant Daehler says the new arrows have proved immensely useful." Between he and Peter, they had finally solved the problem of the premature exploding bolts, and sent them immediately to be tested. The two of them shared a brief smile of triumph before Chris continued. "But too many are coming home to their families on shields." He closed his eyes. "I grow weary, Peter, and the winter will still be long."

Warmth pressed over his hand, and when he opened his eyes, Peter was there, resting his hand gently on Chris'. "We will figure it out, Chris. Make a new weapon. Go on the offensive. The answer is there, I can feel it."

“How many will die before we unlock it?”

“You have always kept them strong in the past, prince. Everything your people tell me speaks of that. You will do so again. We will do so.”

Chris turned his hand upward, lacing his fingers with Peter’s. Peter made no move to pull away, and Chris looked at their entwined hands rather than Peter’s face. “This winter is different. *I can feel that.*” He pulled his bottom lip between his teeth. “I should return to the pass.”

Peter’s grip tightened painfully before he jerked his hand from Chris’. “You jest. This is why you have *soldiers*. Soldiers fight so that the king may *lead*.”

“But I am not the king, Peter. I am barely even the prince. I am merely marking the place until Allison ascends. I am, and have always been, a soldier first.”

“Really. *Really*? Is that so? And what shall Allison do if you get killed? Her arguments aside, she is still a *child*. Are you really so cruel as to expect her to lead?”

“Dying is what we *do*, Peter! It is what the Argents have always done! And she will not be alone. She will have Marin to advise her, and more than that, she will have *you*.”

Unexpectedly, Peter threw back his head and laughed, short and loud and tinged with bitterness. “*That* is your argument here? She’ll have *me*? Firstly, in what world do you think your people would roll over and allow a stranger influence over their queen? And do not give me your “they are *our* people” tripe. Acceptance only goes so far. Secondly, I am the *last* man you want guiding a kingdom.” Chris drew breath to interrupt but Peter steamrolled right over him. “And thirdly, this is all *moot*. We will not be over run, and you will not be returning to the pass, and we will *find a way*.”

Peter’s jaw was tight and his eyes snapped as his nostrils flared with deep gulps of air. Chris thought for a moment before saying carefully, “Is it too much of a cliché if I say you are very handsome when you are angry?” His mouth twitched at the effort of holding back his smile.

Peter threw his hands into the air. “You are *insufferable*! Do not brush me off as if I were some mewling *child*. Just because I am not--”

Chris immediately sobered and reached out to circle Peter's wrist with his fingers. "I am not. I swear to all that is holy I am not." He bowed his head and brushed his thumb over Peter's pulse. "I am sorry if I made it seem so. Peter... I have to *act*. I cannot just sit while the people die. The year Victoria—" He stopped and cleared his throat, "—that year there was barely a family in the country that didn't lose a family member. I cannot sit idly by and let that happen again. And if the only thing I can do is fight and die, then so be it."

"That is *ridiculous*! What good will it do anyone if you throw your life away? 'Dying is what we do,' Peter minced the words out with a sneer. "What kind of idiotic philosophy is *that*? What happened to changing the way things have been done? To not repeating the past? What has happened to that Christopher? Yes, fine, we can die if there is no other option. But for God's sake, we're not doing that unless they're beating at the door!

"Listen...listen." He stepped closer into Chris' space, matching Chris grip on his wrist with one of his own. "I have been thinking. About your theory this is a virus. A disease. Are you familiar with the name Edward Jenner?"

It rang a bell, but it took Chris a minute to place the name. "He believed that by infecting people with cowpox, he could save them from smallpox."

"Not just believed it. *Proved* it. I read his paper. He infected a small child and then exposed him to smallpox. He remained healthy. He has duplicated the results numerous times. He has also shown that the blood, once protected, can be used to protect others."

"Yes," Chris said impatiently, "I remember. But that does us no good. There is no cowpox version of the Undead affliction. We don't even know for sure it *is* a disease. Nor do we have any of *them*."

"But you have their blood," Peter said slowly, feeling it out as he spoke. "Body parts." He began placing his words gingerly, watching Chris as if he were a wild horse that might easily spook. "Jenner had to use a medium because to so much as touch an infected person could pass the disease. But the Undead only infect with their bite. So if Melissa were to use a small amount of the blood...perhaps the disease still lives for a time within it—"

"You want me to deliberately infect someone," Chris breathed.

“Inoculate,” Peter corrected. “A scratch. A *pinprick*.”

“And what then? Throw them to the Undead? Put them under lock and key and see if they become raving mad? Begin to crave *flesh*?”

Peter shrugged. “Yes. Chris...Chris, *listen*. At least we would have somewhere to *start*. Even if *is* a parasite. All of Jenner’s patients ran fevers after the inoculation. It would stand to reason anyone Melissa infected would do the same —”

“This is pseudo science, Peter! Even if it were to work, who are you expecting me to do this to? My *soldiers*? Is this how I am to repay their sacrifices?”

“They would volunteer if you asked them. You know they would.”

“I do. And I would never ask that.”

“Even if it were to save hundreds? Thousands?” He made an impatient sound. “But it is beside the point. That was not my intention. What of your prisons? Do you not have men condemned to die? Would they not be willing to risk the side effects in return for a pardon?”

Chris frowned, more thoughtful than irritated. “We have very few who commit capital offenses. We do not take life for petty crimes. Even larger ones are generally punishable by extra time at the pass, and we have not had to employ that for two winters. I suppose I could send out to the districts--”

An odd look passed over Peter’s face but Chris did not have time to question before he froze, struck by a sudden thought that drove any curiosity over Peter’s facial expressions to the far back of his mind.

“Yes,” he said slowly, burying the unavoidable sense of guilt deep. There was no better way and no better choice. “I think I could find such a prisoner. But first Melissa must agree and be given time to prepare. I think there would need be more than blood in a serum in the end.”

Peter pulled back and blinked. “Truly? You believe it will work then?” He was strangely incredulous for it being his own idea, but Chris thought that might have more to do with how rarely he had been supported by those around him than actual doubt in his theories. Peter was not the kind of man who doubted the

paths he chose. Chris envied him that.

Chris smiled tightly. “I believe you are right. We must start somewhere and this is our best option. Even if it is not without risk.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I hate causing harm. Even on those who have caused so much themselves.”

“I know.” Peter looked at him intently and then reached out and slowly trailed his fingers down Chris’ cheekbone. “It is one of the things I find most remarkable about you. All this brutality around you, and yet you have not become a stone. You still have a heart that beats.”

Chris was caught between turning his face into Peter’s hand and taking comfort there, and doing his best not to call attention to the fact Peter was indulging in so much touch, afraid he might jinx it. In the end he could not resist the lure, and buried his face in Peter’s palm.

“I fear it might be weakness,” he quietly confessed.

He found his face suddenly gripped tight between Peter’s two hands, his fingers twisted hard in Chris hair to keep him from being able to look away.

“You are not *weak*, Christopher Argent. I have known men that are weak, who hid that weakness behind abuses of power because they feared discovery. Feared death and loss. That is not you. It takes true strength to allow those around you to choose their own path. To trust they will choose right. To be willing to guide but not break when they do not. To make them strong so they may survive. To die fearless if you must. Genovia’s kings are weak. You are a better ruler than them all.”

Peter had moved close in his fervor, speaking intently as he refused to let Chris drop his eyes. Everything about him was warm, and bright, and drew Chris in like a beacon.

“Peter—” He swallowed down his words and tugged one of Peter’s hands to his mouth. He pressed his lips to his palm. “Peter.” Another open mouthed press of lips to his wrist. “*Peter.*” When his lips met Peter’s forearm, it was with a tiny flick of his tongue, just a small taste of the body he craved. And all the while Peter watched with wide eyes and parted lips, breath coming fast and shallow because this was breaking the unspoken deal, the unspoken arrangement where

night was kept for night, and niceties were kept during the day.

Chris grazed his teeth along the inside of Peter's elbow. "Peter."

All at once something snapped and Peter was on him, mouth open and demanding, teeth biting and scraping across his lips. He pressed so hard Chris was shoved against the table, edge sure to leave a bruise across the small of the back with how hard it was digging into it. But Chris was unable to give it mind because he was too busy fisting a hand in Peter's hair and shirt, hauling him closer, hauling him flush.

And the door was not locked and anyone could walk in at any moment and Chris *did not care*. Peter's hands were greedy, just as greedy as Chris'; it was as if every part of him had been holding all of this back for God knows how long and the dam had finally broken.

Chris groaned as Peter abandoned his mouth for his neck, and Chris let his head fall back to tempt him to more. His fingers flexed against Peter's back as Peter nipped, then bit, then soothed the sting with his tongue.

"*God.*" He could feel Peter's lips curve to a grin against his throat. "So *good*, Peter." Peter fingers were at his cravat, pulling it loose so he could unbutton his jacket and find the hollow of Chris' throat. When he succeeded, he bit again, this time hard enough to leave a mark as dark as the bruise he sucked over it immediately after.

Chris moaned, head lolling further as he encouraged Peter with his hands and body and words. "Perfect. Your mouth is so perfect. The *things* I dream about your mouth. The penance Father Harris would have me do if he knew how often I wanted to worship you."

Peter abruptly jerked back, eyes wild as he searched Chris' face. Just as Chris was about to open his mouth, either ask what was wrong or apologize for his blasphemy - he wasn't sure which - Peter's jaw firmed and he seemed to come to some kind of decision. Between one heartbeat and the next, he smoothly fell to his knees and began to undo Chris' trousers.

"Peter—" Chris froze in the act of reaching out to stop him, palm just resting on the crown of Peter's bent head. This was something Peter had never done, had never shown the slightest bit of interest in giving to Chris. It had not vexed Chris

overmuch; while he enjoyed the act, he knew there were others who did not. He had assumed that while Peter might like his cock in Chris' mouth, he felt no desire to reciprocate. And Peter gave Chris so much pleasure in every other way —

But here, now, seeing Peter on his knees before him, Chris *wanted*. Wanted the warm, wetness of that mouth he so fantasized about. Wanted *Peter*. But here, out in the open, with the drafts still blowing cold despite the coal stove...

Peter pulled the flap of his trousers aside, pushing his nose into Chris' small clothes so that Chris could feel the scalding warmth of his breath through the cloth. Then Peter looked up at him, pupils blown large and needy and face so openly beautiful that Chris' cock leapt in anticipation.

Still he tried to grasp for sanity. "Peter," somehow his fingers had found their way into Peter's soft hair, petting and twisting as he spoke, "it is cold, and the floor is rough. You'll bruise."

"If it is for you," Peter said, "then I do not care. I will not care."

Something about the words struck a warning bell in Chris, but it was quickly lost amid the loud cacophony of his heart and body as Peter pushed away his small clothes, pulled Chris' cock out, and without ceremony, closed his lips around the tip and brought Chris' length into the wet heat of his mouth.

"*Fu— Christ, Christ, Peter!*" Chris' moan was bordering on a whimper as Peter's lips stretched tight and red around his cock. He couldn't look away, couldn't tear his eyes from Peter's cheeks hollowing out and his eyes dilating wide and the way he was looking at Chris through his lashes like Chris was *everything*.

He slid his thumbs down the hollows of Peter's cheeks, down to trace the wetness of his lips and coax Peter to loosen his seal just enough for Chris to dip his thumb inside and then pull back out, drawing a wet line back up Peter's jaw until his hands were again buried in his hair.

Peter's mouth rode him, messy and wet, and Peter's lips were raw and candy red in seconds, spit coating his chin and cheeks as Chris alternated between rough curses and sweet, crooning encouragement. Peter was moaning around him, eyes shocky and wide as if he had somehow been caught off guard, and Chris had to fight the instinct to twist his fingers tight in his hair, hold him steady as he thrust

into him hard and deep. He had no idea if that was something Peter would enjoy, if it was something he would want, and the last thing he wanted to do was spoil the punch drunk pleasure on Peter's face.

Instead, he held himself still, trembling on the knife's edge of ecstasy and the filthy wet suction of Peter's perfect, perfect mouth. When Peter flicked his tongue into the slit of Chris' cock, Chris whined brokenly, dropping one hand to grip the edge of the table to keep from fisting Peter's hair.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," the vulgar words finally slipped from his mouth, no longer able to be held back despite his best efforts, and Peter's hands flexed painfully tight on his hips, the sensation just driving Chris closer to the edge. Then Peter bobbed so far his nose brushed Chris' pubic thatch. He gagged and choked but didn't even pause before doing so again, and Chris was left gasping at tight squeeze of Peter's throat around his cock as he compulsively swallowed.

"Peter...Peter..." His balls were drawing up and the tightness low in his belly was beginning to center and intensify. He tugged at Peter's hair, because while he might revel in his partner's taste, it was not to everyone's liking. "If you don't want—" His warning was cut off by Peter's bobbing nod and redoubled efforts and before Chris could gasp for more air he was coming, bent double over Peter and pulling him into his body.

He chanted Peter's name, only remembering they were in a very public place, much, much later. When he was finally spent, he collapsed back against the table, hands restlessly petting over Peter's face and shoulders and hair. Peter sat back on his heels, his lips swollen and abused and spit slick. Chris wasn't sure he had ever seen anything more beautiful.

Peter's thighs were spread wide; Chris could see the hard ridge of his erection clearly outlined and he reached out and took his hand and pulled him to his feet. He cupped Peter's face in his hands and pressed their foreheads together.

"You are incredible. I care naught for hell's wrath; I would worship at your feet." He kissed him, soft at first, delving to taste himself on Peter's lips and the soft skin of his inner cheeks. But when Peter whined and pressed closer, riding in small, subtle hitches against Chris' thigh, the kiss grew deeper, more frantic. Chris dropped his hands to Peter's bottom, digging his fingers into the firm flesh and then flipping their positions, hoisting Peter up on the table so that he could

fit himself between his thighs.

“I want to lay you out on this table,” he graveled quietly, “work you open with my fingers. Take you apart with my teeth and tongue and hands.”

Peter began to tremble, and Chris was never going to get used to how Peter responded to just the sound of his voice. He trailed his hands up Peter’s arms, furrowed his hands through his hair and nuzzled against his ear. “I want to take you so deeply and well that everyone will know what we do and I will not care. Until I can never work at this table again without the memory of you laid naked and panting across it making me hard.”

Peter’s head lolled to the side as Chris’ hands dropped to the fastenings of his trousers and Chris sighed a combination of approval and regret. “But as I anticipate we have approximately five minutes before Allison decides to see why we linger,” he slipped his hands inside Peter’s small clothes and pulled out his cock, “this will have to do for now. But soon, Peter,” he said, nudging Peter’s head up with his nose so that he was forced to look Chris in the eye and see the promise in them, “soon I will take you here in the light of the day.”

“*Good*” Peter harshed, dropping back on his elbows as Chris wrapped his hand around his length and began to stroke him, fast and steady. Peter was already wet with the seed leaking from his tip, easing the glide of Chris hand as he twisted his wrist and tightened his grip.

Peter panted, the muscles in his abdomen jumping with every downward stroke of Chris’ hand. “More. *More*,” he gasped, his hips thrusting greedily to meet the circle of Chris’ fingers. He pushed up on his palms, his arms braced taut. “Do it. Do as you say. Put me to pieces. Take me *apart*.”

His cock twitched and pulsed in Chris’ palm, more thick liquid spurting from the tip. Chris could see his end coming, could see it in the way Peter’s lashes began to flutter and his mouth suddenly dropped slack. Chris bent close so that his lips were a only a whispers breath away from Peter’s.

“I will, I swear, Peter. But only so I may put you back together again.” He pressed their mouths together and tasted Peter’s gasp as his hips stuttered and stopped. He came into Chris’ hand, then collapsed back, Chris’ hand the only thing keeping him from cracking his skull against the wood.

Chris wiped his hand against his trousers and then pulled Peter back up against him. He couldn't stop touching him, brushing his hair back from his face, pressing his lips against his cheeks and eyelids. After a moment, Peter opened his eyes, blinking slow and languid. His voice was hoarse, a visceral reminder of where his mouth had just been.

"Would you do it then? Put me back together?"

It was an odd question to match the odd, searching look on Peter's face, and while Chris suspected it held more layers than he knew, the answer was never in question. "Yes, Peter. Always yes."

A brief smile passed over Peter's face and then he reached out and deftly tucked Chris back into his pants. "You and Don Quixote, tilting at windmills." He glanced about the room and then between the two of them. "We have made a mess of the room and ourselves."

They had indeed, the dark stains on both their trousers a giveaway to their impropriety, but Peter looked more amused than troubled. Chris' lips curled in return. "It is a good thing we have our coats then."

"Indeed." Then Peter smiled, warm and rich, his hand cupping the side of Chris' neck in a feather light touch. "If this was part of our training, I should be glad to repeat it on a daily basis. Although I believe I may have ruined the knees of my trousers after all."

The air that rushed from Chris' lungs sounded much like relief and he let his forehead fall to rest against Peter's.

"We shall simply have to pay Miss Elizabeth to sew you a dozen more."

* * * * *

"Here! Peter, here! Take the end of this and hang it there!"

Peter groaned good naturedly, but obediently held out his hand. Allison passed him the end of the garland and began bossily directing him to the very exact placement of it across the fireplace. A rich chuckle sounded from behind him and he turned to find Chris watching the two of them from his perch on the footstool by the tree. His eyes were twinkling as he did not even try to hide his

amusement.

“Your child is a tyrant, Christopher! I pity the servants when she ascends to the throne.”

“Peter!” Allison stomped her foot and pointed. “You’re dropping the end! It will be uneven!”

Chris continued to arrange the string of nuts and berries about the tree. “But look at the organizational skills. Vital to a ruler, wouldn’t you say?”

“*Tyrant!*” Peter insisted, laughing as he did. “God’s blood, beastie! Can you not go vex your father for a moment? I need a drink!”

“Father is not the one whining like a child in leading strings! Besides, are you not my father as well? Therefore I *am* vexing him!” She snickered in self satisfaction, stuck her tongue out and immediately returned to her tyrannous decorating of the sitting room.

Peter froze, darting a look at Chris. Chris was very carefully looking at nothing but the branch in front of him, but Peter could, in profile, see the slight curve of his mouth that meant he was pleased and trying to contain it. Peter relaxed, then finished his task of hanging garland before walking over to Chris and placing a light hand on his arm. He had stopped fighting the urge to occasionally reach out and touch Chris, ever since the morning in the barn. Or rather, it had simply become impossible for his brain to keep his limbs in check. *Unwise*, his mind continued to scream, but it became quieter and quieter with each passing day.

“I think you had better prepare to hand over the crown. She shall take over the troops in no time.” He grabbed a pine cone from a motley pile of odds and ends to which Allison had somehow attached hooks and hung it upon a random branch. He paused, but when the mini-dictator made no reproving shout, he removed his hand and plucked up another.

“But why the tree? It all seems very pagan. Bishop Harris has to be having fits. I know my uncle is, and they are thick as thieves these days.”

Chris harrumphed. “I shall be glad when the thaw comes and we can send him back where he came from.”

“I do not think hell keeps its doors open that long,” Peter deadpanned, just to see if he could get Chris to laugh.

Chris’ lips twitched and his nose crinkled and then a full belly laugh erupted as he threw his head back. Satisfied, Peter traded decorations for the other end of the string Chris was struggling with and began to help him wrap it about the tree.

“The trees are very common in Germany. Master McCall took a trip there a couple of years ago to acquire a new bloodline for the stables; Scott told Allison about the tradition and Allison has insisted on them ever since.” He eyed his daughter to make sure her attention was elsewhere before continuing. “I have not yet broken it to her that she has made quite a few alteration to the Germanic tradition. And I draw the line at putting lit candles on such incendiary material.” He shrugged, that small smile Peter liked so much teasing at the corner of his lips. “But it does no harm, and it brings joy in these bitter cold months to the household. Everyone seems lighter during this time, and I would not take that from them for the world.

“Besides,” he cut his eyes to Peter and let his smile bloom to fruition, “we have much to celebrate this year, I think.”

He could be talking about the pass, about the fact that either due to the new weaponry the troops had been equipped with, or some occurrence in the frozen land they came from, the Undead seemed to have withdrawn in the main, with barely a raiding party a day for the soldiers to deal with.

He could be talking about the pass, but Peter knew he was not.

He did not drop Chris’ gaze, but instead licked his lips and swallowed and raised a hand to rest on Chris’. “Yes. I think it has been a good year.” The Hale crest ring pressed against his palm, solid and warm from Chris’ skin. Talia had pressed it into his hand just seconds before he had left, even though he knew it had never been intended to pass to him or his line.

“Take it” she had whispered into his ear as she’d hugged him goodbye. “Father won’t notice until it is far too late. You are worthy of it, as is Prince Argent.”

At the time, it hadn’t meant much to Peter. He had been certain the shadowy figure of Christopher Argent would throw them out on their ears the moment he discovered Peter’s father’s ruse - had been laying bets on as much - and even the

prospect of transversing the continent pass in the dead of winter was more attractive than returning to Genovia. He'd had every intention of selling the ring off and making his way to America.

Things...had not gone exactly to plan. And now he knew Talia had been right; Christopher was entirely worthy of the ring, the Hale line, the whole damn throne if Peter was honest. That she had missed the mark on *him* was not surprising; Talia had always insisted on being blind to his many flaws. But Peter knew exactly what he was; he had never been particularly delusional. He had just chosen to accept it and thrive upon it. And he had been doing just fine with that strategy up until now.

Chris was looking at him with far too much weight, so Peter took Chris hand between his and pressed his thumb against the raised wolf's head of the ring.

"Talia stole this from my father, you know," he said whimsically, brushing off the seriousness of their previous exchange. "He's probably apoplectic about it by now. Even more so because there isn't a damn thing he can do about it anymore. Admitting it would be an insult. Imagine the slight of telling royalty you were not intending to give them the house sigil in the first place." Chris kept silent, one eyebrow raised and a slight quirk to his mouth. "Anyhow, Talia thought you should have it."

Chris frowned now, switching their hands so that the hold was reversed, and Peter's hand trapped between his own. He turned Peter's plain band under his thumb. "I feel sure her concern was far more with you than I."

"Eternally good Talia," Peter said, with only a small bite in his voice. "Always thinking of everyone's welfare. I'm sorry I wasn't her," he finished abruptly, and pulled his hand away. Chris caught it before he could escape and tugged him back.

"I'm not," he said quietly.

"Well, more fool you, then," Peter quipped lightly. "She's the crown jewel of the Hale family; I can assure you that."

Chris' brows drew together stormily, and as Peter's intention had not been to upset him, not really - sometimes Peter was not altogether sure *why* he could not stop fighting - he changed the subject by tilting his head toward where Allison

had migrated to stare dreamily out the window - probably at Scott.

“What do you think the beastie wants for Christmas?”

For a moment he didn't think Chris was going to let him get away with it, was going to force the conversation back to where it had been. Chris had a habit of getting very annoyed whenever Peter joked about his place in the Hale family - and really the man was a huge hypocrite, since it was apparent he considered himself just one hairs breadth away from failing every single one of his lauded ancestors, not to mention that dead wife of his - but then all at once the tick in Chris' jaw released and his forehead smoothed out. He sighed, bringing Peter's hand to his mouth so he could brush his lips back and forth across his knuckles before letting it go.

“She's been making noises about a new saddle. She's grown enough, so it's time. Or perhaps a new crossbow, one fitted for the new bolts we've made.”

Peter yawned dramatically. “How utterly practical you are, Christopher. Fine,” he waved his hand at Chris, “you get her the boring presents. I'll get her something she'll actually like. There's a reason I'm her favorite, you know.”

Chris rolled his eyes, his lips pressed together in a smile. “You won't be her favorite until you can turn a decent curl, and we all know that's never going to happen. So I think I'm safe.”

“It's unnatural what your fingers can do,” Peter pouted. “I still hold you sold your soul to old Luci to get those ringlets right.” Peter had only managed to make a mess of Allison's hair when he'd endeavored to have Chris show him how it was done. Allison had summarily banned him from ever trying again and, to add insult to injury, kicked him out of the room altogether.

“Oh, I don't know,” Chris purred, his voice suddenly going low and whiskey rough, “I think you're rather fond of what my fingers can do.”

And really, it was patently *unfair* for Chris to do that when they were in no position to follow through. Peter narrowed his eyes. Chris laughed, but stepped back, although there was a promise in his eyes that spoke of later.

“And what of you, prince consort?” Chris made a final adjustment to the tree and hopped down from the ladder. “Have you thought of what you would like for

Christmas?”

“Hmm...” Peter tilted his head and pretended to consider. “How about opening the ballroom in the west wing back up, and throwing a proper party? It’s entirely appropriate, considering the holidays.”

Chris’ response was immediate, and caught Peter completely off guard. “Absolutely *not*,” he snapped.

Peter’s eyes widened and he had to stop himself from taking a step back. It was not quite the reaction he had expected. “Very well then,” he said smoothly, “please forget I asked. I’m sure any little trinket will do just fine, prince. Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he retreated several feet, “I believe I’ll go see if I can suss out what the princess would prefer.”

“Peter!” Chris’ voice came from behind him but Peter ignored him, making his way steadfastly across the room. “Peter, wait— Goddammit!”

Chris grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. “Peter!” he said urgently, trying to force Peter to look at him rather than carefully over his shoulder. Peter lived on fight or flight, and right now, Chris was perilously close to pushing him over to ‘fight.’

“Careful, sire,” Peter cautioned. “You’re making a scene. You will worry your child and embarrass the servants.”

“I don’t *care*!” Chris slid his hand from his shoulder to his cheek, moving in close. Peter tensed, taking another step back, this time toward the door rather than Allison. “Don’t, Peter. Please...just don’t. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Chris seemed uncharacteristically flustered as he floundered around his words. It was enough so that Peter’s adrenaline peaked and retreated and his curiosity was piqued. He could hear Allison behind him, no doubt avidly watching the proceedings, but if Chris was intent on doing this here, then he wasn’t going to stop him. Chris scrubbed a hand through his hair.

“I’m sorry,” he said a third time. “I should not have reacted that way. It was unjust. You don’t...there’s no way you could have...” He took a deep breath and said steadily, “Victoria died in that room. We have not used it since.”

Peter stilled. “Oh,” he said stupidly. “Oh.”

Chris shook his head. “But it is just a room. And it has far more happy memories than sad. I will...I will think upon it. And please...” he cupped Peter’s face in both hands now, “...please forgive me. I did not mean—”

“Don’t.” He could feel Allison creeping up beside them, see her tentative approach from the corner of his eye and he covered Chris’ hand with one of his while he used the other to reach out and draw her in to where she could reach her father. She immediately buried her face in Chris’ jacket. “All is well, Christopher. Nothing need happen. I never would have asked if I had known.” He bit down on his tongue, on the memory of his father’s drunken accusation. “*You ruin everything you touch.*” He tasted copper and iron and smiled pleasantly as he swallowed it down. “I can select something appropriately expensive, never fear. All is well.”

Chris shook his head. “No. I never meant for it to become a mausoleum. And we have been solemn in this house for too long. As I said earlier, we have much to celebrate this year. Isn’t that so, my little arrow?” He rested his hand on Allison’s head as she nodded emphatically into his jacket. He looked back at Peter earnestly. “I will think on it.”

Kali’s voice rang from the doorway, shattering the mood. “Can we think upon this punch instead? The three of you look terribly maudlin. I fear it must be hunger. Don’t you agree, Jennifer?”

Peter turned with a sigh of relief, finding Jennifer and Kali at the door along with a trolley of punch and cookies that some intrepid servant must have left before fleeing the scene. He reached back and pressed his hand to Chris’ before flinging his arms out in a grandiose gesture as he walked toward the two women.

“Food arrives, and then, magically, so do you. Why am I not surprised? I have sorry news for you. No work—” he gestured to the decorations filling the room, “—no dessert. We have slaved through Empress Allison’s demands, and so,” he reclaimed the trolley and wheeled it into the room, “Christopher and I are entitled to all the spoils.”

Jennifer raised an eyebrow. “I feel certain we can convince the Empress to give us a reprieve. Especially as we were out shopping for her gift. What do you say, Allison? Can we come in, despite your grumpy guardsman?”

Allison extracted herself from Chris to scramble her way to Jennifer and Kali.

“Yes!” she said emphatically. “Can you give me a hint? Is it big?” She grabbed Jennifer and Kali’s hands and dragged them over to the settee, while Peter gave Chris a despairing look, pleased to see amusement had returned to lighten his eyes.

“She’s entirely too merciful, Christopher. I fear she gets that from you.”

“Don’t speak too loudly, Peter.” Chris spoke from the side of his mouth as he joined Peter at the cart and began pouring the both of them cups of punch. “Or she may take away our cookie privileges.”

Peter smirked, shoved a cookie unceremoniously into Chris’ mouth and let his thoughts be pulled away by the tide of the room.

* * * * *

Weak morning light filtered through the windows; the temperature had dropped drastically the night before, leaving patterns of ice across the glass and a deadly slick over the snow below. But the winter did not touch the room, where the brazier was lit and Peter and Chris lazed half in and half out of a thick layer of blankets.

There was nothing pressing today. No meeting with Deaton to pull Chris away, no anxious Allison waiting at the door to be entertained. Nothing to do but stay exactly where they were until hunger forced them into the outer rooms to see what the servants had left for sustenance. It was decadent and lazy and something Chris did not allow himself very often and something Peter tempted him to as much as he could. After all, what was the point of being royalty if one did not take advantage of it every once in a while?

He flopped onto his back, tucking his hands beneath his head. Beside him, Chris stayed on his stomach, eyes barely opened to slits and hair sticking up every which way where his head was buried in his arms. Peter was particularly proud to know it was the grip of his hands that had left it as such. Chris’ tongue flicked out to wet dry lips.

“Tell me something real,” he demanded sleepily.

It was a game Chris liked to play in these early hours of the morning, to try to sneak under Peter’s walls while his defenses were low. It worked more often

than not, mainly because Peter had discovered that if he went along, Chris was more than willing to do the same for him after.

This morning he turned on his side toward Chris, propping his head on his hand as he thought for a long moment. He thought Chris had almost fallen back to sleep when he finally spoke.

“I was twelve the first time I fell in love. He was the son of the woman who did the laundry and I kissed him and our housekeeper saw and ran and told my father.” He had Chris’ full attention by then, his eyes no longer hazy with sleep but watching him intently. “Nothing happened to me; my father never even mentioned it. But the woman was turned out from her job with no recommendation. I never saw him again. It was the first time I realized what it would mean to be the thing I was in the world I lived in. And it was the first time I decided that if I was to be this thing despised, I would not make their disdain comfortable for them.”

Chris ran his fingers through Peter’s hair, cupping his jaw. “Better to be hated on your own terms than ignored on theirs?”

“Mmm...something like that.” Peter was relieved Chris did not attempt to offer words of comfort or pity; he neither wanted nor needed them and knew himself well enough to recognize he likely would have withdrawn if Chris had tried. That Chris perhaps knew him well enough to recognize that as well was something Peter chose not to examine too closely.

“And now your turn. Tell me something real, prince.”

Chris smiled briefly at that, then fell silent. Peter could practically see the wheels turning in his head, likely Chris sorting through memories and stories and trying to decide which one would be equal to the weight of the thing Peter had entrusted him with. When he spoke, it was low and steady.

“You know my wife died defending the palace, saving our household and the town from the Undead. They were driven to the ballroom, and she stood at the door with Claudia, Captain Stilinski’s late wife, and kept the hoard at bay until reinforcements arrived. They stood for *two hours*. Claudia fell then, and Victoria was left to stand alone for another hour. And she did. She stood until she heard us, until she saw us cut through the rear, begin to overwhelm the hoard with sheer numbers. Until she saw me.”

Peter was, as always, caught between admiration of Victoria's strength and shallow jealousy of the tone in Chris' voice whenever he spoke of her. But he held his tongue, waiting for the balance of what Chris had to say. Chris' Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard before continuing.

"I told you she died in that room. What you don't know, and what no one speaks of, is that I was the one who killed her.

Peter jerked back, caught entirely off guard. "I'm sorry, what?" He was having trouble making sense of Chris' words.

"She had been bitten," Chris said softly. "Very early on. Both she and Claudia. Most soldiers take their own lives immediately after. Those who don't turn within the hour. Claudia held for two, and when it was too far, when she could not fight and when the fever took hold hard enough she could not force her own knife, she trusted Victoria to do what had to be done, to be her friend in the truest sense.

"After, Victoria held until she knew I had come, until I could do the same. How could I dishonor her by passing the sword to anyone else?"

"And Allison was there?" Peter asked quietly.

"Yes. She does not remember, of course. She was far too young, not yet a year. One of the maids covered her eyes, regardless. Every person in this castle over the age of ten owes their life to Victoria and Claudia."

There were many things Peter wanted to say: that he was horrified that Chris had been forced to make that choice. That he now understood why Chris was so driven to stand and protect and make sure those around him could defend themselves. That necessary as it might have been, he knew with surety that Chris still blamed himself.

Instead, he chose simply to say, "I'm sorry." Because while words of sympathy might make his hackles rise, they were important for Chris to hear. Chris who carried the entire burden of his people's survival in the tightness of his shoulders.

Chris shrugged, closing his eyes again in a show of nonchalance. "It was a long time ago."

Peter rolled his eyes to himself and then scooted cautiously closer, resting his cheek on the curve of Chris' arm. "That's why you're trying so hard to find a treatment, or a cure. If you'd had one at the time..."

"Victoria might still be alive. That's a large part, of course. Gerard refused to even consider it."

Peter was not sure how he felt about that, other than the fact he grew less and less fond of Chris' father the more he heard of him. But if Chris *had* had a cure, and Victoria *had* lived...

There would have been no need to send to Genovia for the bridal price.

Peter shifted uncomfortably and without opening his eyes, Chris looped an arm about his waist and settled him tighter into his side. Peter was beginning to think the closed eyes were less about a pretense to casualness and more to enable Chris to continue to talk about the subject. If Peter was a good person he would take it as a sign to let the matter drop, be grateful Chris had trusted him enough to show him this tiny piece of his soul. But Peter was not a good person, and this might be the only chance he got to finish putting the puzzle together.

He asked, very careful of his tone, because the last thing Peter wanted was for him to think he somehow thought Chris was to blame, "How did it happen, that you were not there? That there were no troops in place?"

Chris drew in a deep breath. "There were two platoons there. They were the first to be slaughtered. It is because of them Victoria had warning enough to gather the household and send a rider with word."

Chris finally opened his eyes, and they were steady and dark and looking far beyond Peter into a past only Chris could see. "It was my fault."

Peter opened his mouth to object and Chris' attention snapped back to him. "No, it was my fault," he said again. "It was."

"I feel fairly certain it was the fault of the Undead," Peter said frostily.

Chris smiled without humor. "I would have been there - the rest of the battalion would have been there - if I had listened to Gerard. Lucien's horde...they rarely appear in the districts. The mountains are high and fair to impassible, by us or

them alike. Occasionally there's a straggler, but as you can imagine they're dead before they reach town limits.

"But that year...I told you how cold it was, did I not?" He didn't wait for Peter to respond before continuing, his eyes looking past him again. "The pass was embattled, but the troops were holding well. I did not lead out that year... because of Allison, you know," he said by way of explanation. "It had taken Victoria a long time to conceive. Years. We had thought she might be barren. Another mark against the match for my father..."

He drifted off somewhere else for a long moment, and Peter was loathe to force him back. Finally he shook himself and saw Peter again. "I'm sorry. I was..." He trailed off and wrinkled his forehead and finally shook his head again. "There was a avalanche in the first estate. It opened a hole and they were under attack. They sent word...they were holding, but requested assistance. The gap needed to be closed." At Peter's look he said succinctly, "Dynamite. The mountain pass is too big, but the smaller holes can be collapsed. It takes time, though, and men.

"Gerard said no. It was their duty to take care of it, and ours to keep the palace and township. He said no, but it was only a few hours hard ride. We could be gone before he would even know! There was no danger here; the pass was held! Victoria agreed. And so I went, in the dead of night, and took the bulk of the battalion with me."

"But then the mountain pass was lost." Peter said. "You could not have known!"

Chris shook his head. "The mountain pass was never breached. To this day, we still don't know how they came. But my God, *they came*. Appeared out of nowhere in the very castle walls. And if I had listened to my father, I would have *been here*."

"And maybe died! Maybe all of you would have died for want of the nail! Christ, Christopher! You are not a soothsayer! You cannot see the future! You did as you should! Tell me - did you close the hole?"

Chris nodded mutely.

"Then you did as you should. Damn anyone who says otherwise." He was fairly certain Chris' father was among those he had just consigned to hell and he was doubly glad the man was dead and gone. "And with everything I know of

Victoria, she would have told you the same.”

“How many times do you think I have told myself that? How many times, Peter? It does not change the fact I left my post and my wife *died*.”

Peter was gearing himself up for what was going to be a spectacular fight, one that *would* end with him winning, when something occurred to him.

“Where exactly was your father in all of this?

“We thought he had been lost in the initial attacks, but a stable boy found him unconscious in the barracks. He had been struck a blow that split his head, but he was still holding his sword. He was lucky he regained consciousness at all.”

Convenient, Peter thought, but held his tongue.

“Christopher,” he said, soft as a whisper, “I am sorry for what happened. But I am not sorry that you lived, and that Allison lived. Nor am I sorry that Jennifer’s home survived because you and Victoria chose to defy the King. And I am not sorry your people know they are safe with you because of what happened. I am not like you; I do not look around and see a whole world to be saved, to be cared for. My world is much, much smaller than that, and everything in it I care for is still standing because of your choices. So I thank you for that.”

The spiraling self blame in Chris’ eyes had faded by the time Peter finished, taken over by a kind of soft warmth that had Peter caught between squirming away from its intensity and curling his toes into Chris’ calves to steal more of it.

“I think you sell yourself short, Peter. I think your world is wider than you believe.”

Only because I see it through you. The words caught at the tip of his tongue, and he swallowed them back just in time. That was the type of thing one could never take back, and Peter did not believe in no escape scenarios. He sniffed haughtily. “As I have said before, Prince - you, sir, are an idiot.”

Chris buried his face in his arm and laughed, and the seriousness in the room dissipated. Peter ran his palm down Chris’ back, the cover giving way in front of him to bare the lithe muscle to his appreciative gaze.

“Are you going to make us get up now?”

Chris stretched, and arched into his touch before settling back in. “Not just yet.” His eyes fluttered closed again. “We could go back to sleep. The Ladies Blake will keep Allison occupied for hours still.”

Chris’ reluctance to move was starting to become worrisome. As much as Peter might enjoy it - as long as he could keep his brain from spinning - it wasn’t like Chris at all. “Are you feeling ill? Should I call Melissa?”

“I think she would be somewhat scandalized should we call her right this instant, don’t you think?” Chris’ sentence was broken with a yawn, and Peter’s hand drifted back up his spine and to his forehead. He did not feel overly warm, but still - everyone knew how quickly sickness could take hold.

“She’s a physician. Surely she’s seen a naked man before.”

Chris’ lips turned up. “Of course. But perhaps not two so obviously post-coital.” He yawned again, a groan rumbling softly in his chest. “I can hear your mind working, Peter. Let it quiet. I am well. I like it here,” he said finally, “where you don’t work so hard to wall me out.”

“I don’t wall you out!” Peter was indignant, perhaps more so that Chris had actually called him out than with the accusation itself.

“Liiiar,” Chris sing-songed, but he was grinning as he did, so Peter did not think he was actually upset. “You do, and you don’t, and then you do again. But not here. So be at peace and let me win for once. Duty will intrude soon enough.”

Duty was practically written in Chris’ blood. That he was willing to lay it down, even for a moment, for the sole reason of *him*, drove Peter to silence for a solid five minutes. During that time, his hands began to wander, mapping out Chris’ upper body - his shoulders, his spine, the dip in his lower back. Chris stayed relaxed and still under Peter’s ministrations, the quickening of his breath and the slight restlessness in his hips the only signs he was awake at all.

Finally, Peter pushed the blanket past Chris’ hips and to his thighs, spending a long moment just admiring the way the light played across the firm curve of Chris’ buttocks before moving to touch. It was the feel of Chris against his palms that eventually pushed him to speak.

“Would you let me?” He asked, curious, running his hand over Chris’ flank and dipping just barely into the crevice.

Chris opened his eyes lazily, and Peter felt a thrill at the desire in them. Which was then momentarily eclipsed by his surprise when Chris said simply, “Of course.”

Peter pushed up higher on one elbow. “You say that very easily for a man in your position.”

Chris rolled over, wrapping his arm around Peter to bring him over on top. “What has position to do with our bed?” He wriggled his eyebrows and leered playfully. “Other than the positions I like to arrange you in.”

“You can’t be ignorant of the prevailing theory on —”

Chris carded a hand through Peter’s hair and Peter briefly fought with the urge to press into it, before finally giving in. As Chris had said, it was harder to find walls here. “What I am aware of is that the prevailing theory is idiotic. What part of us finding pleasure in each other - in *every* way possible - speaks anything to our position or power? One has nothing to do with the other. There is no shame in this. Why would you ever think I would consider it so?”

He paused, and his look turned more searching. Peter’s skin felt stretched too tight over bone, stripped bare and exposed. He would have pulled away if Chris’ arm had allowed it. Or if it wouldn’t have been a sign of vulnerability. Instead he stared unwaveringly back. And then Chris spoke, slow and careful.

“I was right, that first night, wasn’t I? That no one had ever touched you.” He hurried over Peter’s objection. “Not overall..not that you were a virgin. But in that way. In being beneath me. You would never have let yourself be mounted if I were not royalty, would you? Even if there had been warmth there when we said our vows.”

“Christopher, I’m not sure why we need to —”

“You just assumed it would have to be that way that night. That I would expect it. That there was no choice in the matter.” Chris looked green around the gills but his voice was neutral. “Did you feel shamed then, by my touch? Did I insult you? Did I shame you? *Do* I shame you?”

Chris' entire body was tight and Peter had the feeling he was seconds away from flinging himself from the bed. Which was the *last* thing Peter wanted.

"Of course not! No! You gave me pleasure...you *give* me pleasure! Degrees of pleasure I never knew existed! Christopher, you are reading too much into —"

Chris shook his head, and Peter could feel slight tremors in the hand at the small of his back. He could not tell if the look in Chris' eye spoke more of fury or hurt, but both emotions were there. "So you say. And yet you still thought I would never allow you to do the same because it would belittle or reduce me. Some part of you must then cringe at the way I touch you. See it as me requiring you to submit to my *title*. That's what you meant, that moment in the workshop—"

His jaw ground tight and he continued through clenched teeth. "I need you to let me go now, Peter. I need to leave so that I may—" He braced his hands against Peter's chest to push him off and Peter fought back, grabbing Chris' face in both hands and forcing him to look at him.

"Christopher, be *fair*." He shook him, just a bit, just to drive the wild look from his eyes and make him focus. "You have *no idea* what it means to desire your own sex in my world. What? You had your father who hated it? Your priest? A few naysayers who might frown and wag their finger? I could have been disowned, lost everything, been beaten, been killed."

"I know how the continent—"

"Oh, you know, but you never had to *live* it. I might have played at flaunting my inclinations, but had there been any actual evidence, if anyone had actually *seen* proof... Do you wish to know how I am an expert at bandaging knuckles? Because I have had to fight my way out of enough alleys from those who wish to *cure* me.

"So trust me when I say *no one* talks about it. Our assignations are in the dark, in the corners and in the whorehouse. How do you expect us not to become drenched in shame? How did you expect us to not create our hierarchy based upon the only world we knew? How did you expect it not to infect our very intimacies? How did you expect me to *know*? How was I to know *anything* before you? Not all of us grew up in your fairy tale world!"

"You consider this a fairy tale." Chris' tone was incredulous, but the urge to fly

seemed to have left him and his look was more considering than wounded now. “Where we are always one bad winter from becoming worm’s meat for the Undead. I feel certain I have heard your very expressive opinions on all of Befastia’s failings.”

Peter frowned and relaxed his grip so it was less holding Chris in place and more cupping his jaw. “Better a quick death of the body than a slow death of the soul, don’t you think?” Chris’ mouth twisted in silent agreement. “Christopher. Yes. Yes, I did expect to be required to submit to your title. No, I would not have done so had our titles been reversed. And *no*, I did not expect the complete and entirely mind shattering ecstasy I found in it. But I *did*. I did and I do and I do not feel shame in that.” *Not anymore*, he mentally tacked on, but it was an addendum he was not about to verbalize. “And believe me, if I did not have some *inkling* that you were different, I never would have ventured to ask in the first place! Can you not at least see that?”

“But you were surprised at my answer, nevertheless.”

Peter shrugged. “Everything about you surprises me, Prince.”

Chris sighed, the last bit of tension leaving him as his arms slid back around Peter’s waist. “You’re right. It is different here. I should have taken into account what you might have—”

Peter put his hand over Chris’ mouth. “Is there anything you do *not* personally blame yourself for? I hate to break this to you, Prince, but the world does not *actually* revolve around you. You are not responsible for all that goes wrong and for every misunderstanding that is made. I could have spoken, and I did not. You could have realized, and you did not. I think it is all a wash here.”

Chris nipped at his palm and Peter eyes him critically. “I am not moving my hand until you promise the first words out of your mouth will not be I’m sorry. Nod if you swear.”

Chris rolled his eyes but nodded and Peter cautiously moved his hand.

Chris’ eyes danced as he spoke. “We have wandered far from where we began, wouldn’t you agree? So yes, I would more than simply *let* you. Is it something you want?”

Relieved Chris finally seemed willing to *let it go*, Peter considered the question with real intent for the first time. Imagined Chris beneath him, all that muscle and grace and strength at his disposal. Imagined Chris arching and shuddering as Peter thrust repeatedly into him. Imagined Chris coming apart in his hands.

Chris looked up at him with a knowing smirk, as Peter pressed, half hard, against his thigh.

And then he remembered being beneath Chris, remembered the overwhelming feeling of being filled and moved and *worshiped*. Of Chris coaxing him to come apart with just the right word or touch. Of Chris holding him steady and grounded. Of coming so hard black spots danced in his vision.

He cleared his throat, ignoring the smug look on Chris' face. "Yes," he said decisively. "It is something I want." He paused, his hand braced on Chris chest. "But perhaps...not *right* this moment."

Chris laughed and rolled Peter beneath him. He nuzzled at Peter's neck while reaching for the bottle of oil still on the bedside table. "Very well, prince consort. I shall wait. But do not tease unless you truly intend to follow through." He raised his head and Peter shivered at the heat in his eyes. "I crave every part of you, in every way possible."

Peter pulled him down into a kiss, distracting himself from the parts inside him that would prove the lie to Chris' bald pronouncement.

Chapter 9

Christmas Eve dawned icy and cold, the light thin and brittle and every fire in the castle set to roaring long before the sun rose. Chris sat on the settee in the outer room, waiting for Peter to finish getting dressed and turning a small jewelry box over and over in his hands.

He had considered giving it to Peter for Christmas, but the implied intimacy of the gift and the blatant message in it finally had him deciding on a more private setting for the exchange. He had long wanted to replace the makeshift band he had married Peter with, give him something more fitting his station and the heirloom Peter had entrusted him with. And if it was also an unspoken symbol of Chris' affections, well, so be it. Peter still had too many walls intact to hear the words, but as long as they remained un verbalized, he hoped it would not spook Peter.

It had taken him weeks to decide what he wanted, and then a solid month for the jeweler to design and craft it. It had only just been delivered a few days ago, slipped in by Mister Finstock while Peter was distracted.

Chris had just begun to crack the lid when the door between the bedroom and the sitting room opened. Chris hurriedly shoved the box between the cushions and looked up with a smile.

"Ready?"

"No." Peter scowled and held up a limp cravat. "The bastard won't fold right."

Chris suspected if Peter had been in his own rooms he would have simply called for his man, but here he tended to follow Chris' lead of only bothering the servants if it was absolutely necessary.

"Use one of mine," Chris suggested. "They were returned freshly starched yesterday, I believe. Top drawer in the dressing room," he directed.

Peter made a face but nodded and disappeared back into the bedroom. Chris retrieved the box and began mentally rehearsing speeches. He'd gotten as far as *Prince Consort...Peter...* in approximately seven different tones and variations when he realized it had been some time since Peter had gone back in and he was

no longer hearing any sounds from the bedroom. He pocketed the box in his jacket and cautiously opened the bedroom door.

“Peter?” There was no answer, but the door to his dressing room was open. He made his way toward it and found Peter standing by the dresser, his back to Chris, absolutely still. The drawer was open and Peter’s cravat was an abandoned scrap of cloth at his feet.

“Peter?” he said again.

Peter turned around and Chris sucked in a harsh breath at the sight of a familiar letter unfolded in his hands. He had forgotten he had put it there; not exactly *hiding* it, but not keeping it in plain sight, either.

Peter looked up, eyes lost and voice bewildered. “Talía...wrote to you? My sister sent you a letter and you never told me? Of course you didn’t.” His voice began to find ground. “She asked you not to.”

“Peter—”

“That’s what this was all about, wasn’t it?” He made a sweeping motion with one hand. “Why you were so careful and kind. So generous with your attention. Because she *requested* it of you. Of course. I should have known.” Peter’s smile was bitter and brittle, but it was the self deprecation in it that twisted a fist around Chris’ heart. As if he were calling himself ten kinds of fool for being stupid enough to believe someone would do any of those things simply for *him*. Simply because of *Peter*. Chris took a step forward as Peter let the letter flutter to the ground. “Good ole Talía,” Peter murmured, eyes jumping to everywhere but Chris. “Good to know she’s still looking out for her baby brother.”

Then Peter’s smile turned vicious and cruel in a way it hadn’t been since his very first days in Befastia and he sneered coolly at Chris. “But turns out the jokes on you, prince. Because Talía *lied*. Talía lies a lot, you know. It’s what would have made her such a good ruler. If I’d had my way.”

Chris was losing him. He could feel Peter slipping from him word by word, everything he had worked to forge being undone in a single instant. With enough time, he might could rebuild it, hand over foot, and Peter was worth however long that time might be, but if he did not fix this *right now*, he didn’t know if Peter would ever trust him again.

Peter continued on, seemingly oblivious to Chris' desperate struggle to find a way out of this.

"She didn't send me here to try to *save* me. To try to appease the letter of the treaty. She sent me here to save our family from ruin. To save it from *me*. You were just a convenient dumping ground. You know I arranged that little coup, yes? Oh no, right...of course you didn't. But Talia did. Sister dearest found out. Knew it was only a matter of time before the state eventually found out as well. Our family would have been shunned, cast out, ruined in society forever. And we all know Talia would do anything to protect the *family*."

Chris blinked. "You plotted to overthrow the monarchy."

"And very nearly succeeded, don't forget that. Bloated, overfed bastards. Sitting so long in their ivory towers they had no idea what the country needed. Had no idea how many people were starving or on the streets while they sat and ate *cake* and the aristocracy bled them dry. They were an embarrassment to the entire nation and everyone knew it. It was only a matter of time before someone stepped in. It may as well have been the Hales! We at least know what to do with power!"

"Peter —"

"How does it feel, prince? To know we sent a traitor into your midst with no warning whatsoever. Let a man who is the absolute antithesis to everything you hold dear install himself in your home. Worm his way into your bed and your daughter's life. Win your people's heart. How does it feel to know that you actually gave him the Argent name. And you can't even take it back. Stings a bit, doesn't it? Really, for all you know, I could be planning to take over *right now*. That does sound like something I would do."

Peter stopped, breath hissing between his lips, eyes cold, and triumph clear on his face, secure in the knowledge he had wounded Chris far more than Chris might suppose Peter had been wounded by him.

The fist around Chris' heart loosened its grip just enough so that he could breathe again. "Peter," he said calmly, "I'd like to show you something. Please." He held out a beckoning hand.

"What? Do you have an attic where you keep the unsavory house guests? I'm

sure moving me back next to dear Uncle Deucalion will serve quite the same purpose.”

“No, I’d like to show you the west wing.”

Peter scoffed and rolled his eyes, his body still held rigid and at the ready for some kind of attack. “I’ve seen it, remember? Dull, dreary place. Full of boxes and a ballroom where you killed your wife.”

If Peter had hoped for a reaction with his callous dig, Chris must have disappointed him. “No, I’d like to show you the real west wing.”

He could only hope Peter’s innate curiosity will outweigh his need to keep swinging at Chris. He extended his arm further, palm up. “Please.”

Peter narrowed his eyes, and completely ignoring Chris’ hand, stepped around him and out the dressing room. He looked back at Chris, eyes that were normally full of life, even when he was snapping at Chris, showing barely a spark of anything at all. “Well? Let’s get on with it.”

* * * * *

They walked side by side through the halls, the inches between them feeling like miles to Chris. Neither of them spoke and with every step Chris could feel Peter pulling further and further away. He wanted to scream, shake his fist at the sky, press Peter into the wall and demand he remember Chris was nothing like the fools who had mishandled him in the past - How could he so easily discount everything he had learned of Chris these last four months? If he were honest, what he really wanted to do was track down Lord and Lady Hale and shake them to pieces for the number they had done on his husband before Chris had even known he existed.

At one point, as they walked through the public halls, Jennifer stuck her head out of the sitting room and made as if to call out. Chris caught her eye and gave a minute shake of his head and she looked hard between the two of them before withdrawing back into the room. The spinet began sounding out a mournful tune and Chris had never wanted to throttle her more in his life.

Finally they entered the west wing. Peter looked around at the dark gloom with a disdainful sniff, but Chris ignored him, taking a scone from the wall and

lighting it before turning directly toward the now defunct sitting room. He heard Peter at his heels as he entered the room and made his way to the floor to ceiling mirror that reflected dully in the candle light. He passed the scone wordlessly to Peter as he pressed a complicated pattern across the leaves embossed on the mirror's frame. He depressed one final leaf and there was an audible click, almost as audible as the breath Peter sucked in when the mirror swung out, revealing a brightly lit corridor that sloped sharply down.

“My ancestors built this at the same time as the castle.” Chris explained as they started down. They used to hide the children here before they were able to secure the pass. It was where Victoria was trying to reach when they were pinned into the ballroom. No one but our family even remembers it is here anymore, but occasionally we find it useful for hiding...other things.”

He stopped at a door with a thick, medieval looking lock and bolt. The key hung on the wall beside it and he took it, along with a deep breath, as he undid the bolt and lock, muscles trying to seize against the risk he was taking. It was a leap of faith, but it was a leap he was willing to take for Peter.

He opened the door and the elderly man inside looked up from where he was sitting in an armchair, blanket wrapped around his shoulders as he read a book. He could fool you into thinking he was a kindly grandfather if you didn't know better, and Chris most certainly did.

The man sneered, looking between Chris and Peter. “Well, my son finally deigns to visit. And you brought the catamite.” The disgust in his voice made Chris' hackles rise but he refused to take the bait.

Instead he turned to Peter and said formally, “Prince Consort, I would like you to meet my father, the King of Befastia, Gerard Argent.”

“But...” Chris was glad to see something other than icy blankness on Peter's face, even if it was confusion. “...Your father disappeared at the pass. Everyone knows that.”

Chris shrugged, walking over to the sideboard to pour a brandy and take it to his father. Upon further consideration he took one for himself as well, and then brought another to Peter. “It was a convenient enough story to cover up what I had done. To stop any questions. So as you can see, I am the last person to be judging anyone's rebellion.”

Peter looked at the brandy in his hand, then threw it back rather than sipping it. He set the glass down with a resounding *clink*. “What did he do?”

Chris raised an eyebrow, surprised that Peter did not even consider another alternative. “Why are you so sure he did anything? Perhaps I simply wanted his position. His power. Got tired of waiting around for him to die.”

Peter’s look expressed solid incredulity. “If I know anything of you at all, prince, it is that *power* is not your Achilles heal. You could no more imagine stealing it for your own use than I could imagine living forever under a yoke.”

There was some small satisfaction in that, in Peter believing so firmly in Chris’ lack of personal ambition. An ember of hope kindled in Chris’ breast.

There was a noise behind them, and then Melissa bustled into the room, medical bag in hand. She set it on the small table beside Gerard’s chair and pulled out two small vials and two syringes, one filled with a rust colored liquid. When she was done she looked over at Peter. “It is about time,” she said firmly. “We all told him you would understand.”

She impatiently held out her hand and Gerard sneered but took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve. She drew a vial of blood and then filled the second syringe with liquid and jabbed the needle into Gerard’s inner arm. Rather less than gently, she depressed the plunger and let the orange bleed into Gerard’s veins.

Peter narrowed his eyes. “We? Who all knows about this, prince?” As of late, Peter’s use of his title could be a sign of affection or a shield against closeness, and right now it was the latter. Chris bit down on the urge to demand he use his name.

“Melissa, Captain Stilinski, Allan. A few trusted servants. The Ladies Blake.”

“As you can see, catamite, the ranks of treason run deep. My son plotted his power grab for quite some time.” Gerard ignored Melissa daubing and bandaging his arm, as if she were nothing more than a pesky servant changing his bedsheets. It was really no different than he had treated her or anyone else prior to his imprisonment.

“Shut up,” Peter said mildly, without looking at him. “I have no wish to hear any of your poison. You have yet to answer me, prince. On everyone’s lips is the tale

of a dutiful son. What changed that?”

Chris’ lip curled up as he fought the wave of fury through his chest, and he took a sip of brandy before answering. “He killed my mother.” His voice was short and clipped. “I am fairly certain he killed my sister as well. And when he started sinking his claws into *my* daughter, I could no longer pretend not to see.”

“He tried to kill Allison?” Peter’s voice was low and dangerous, and Chris saw his fingers twitch as if they wanted to reach for a weapon.

“Yes.”

“Why is he here? Why was he not tried?”

Gerard laughed without humor. “Excellent question. I see no one saw fit to inform you that my son has grown increasingly unbalanced since his hand in his wife’s death. He jousts as shadows these days.”

“Shut *up*, old man.” Peter’s teeth were bared and his voice vicious. “Understand I am simply trying to understand why you are not *dead*, not whether he is telling the truth.”

Peter looked like Peter again, not some wounded animal, and the ember in Chris’ chest flared a bit brighter.

“I have no evidence,” Chris said, spreading a hand wide in entreaty. “Just the whispered words of my mother’s chambermaid, telling me my father slowly poisoned my mother. Telling me my father took my sister and —” Chris’ words choked off and he took a deep breath. “She was on her deathbed. Delusional. I had no reason to believe her. Could *not* believe her. For all of my father’s shortcomings, the idea he could— his *wife*. His *flesh and blood*. I could not *conceive*.”

“Of course you couldn’t,” Peter murmured. “Because *you* would never conceive of the idea.” There was no bite, just observation, so Chris continued.

“I put it from my mind. And then last winter Allison became ill. And nothing helped, and Melissa could not find a cause and she was *dying*. And I remembered. I remembered and I knew.”

“What did you do?”

“I locked my father away and I turned out anyone his influence touched. And she became well again. But there is no proof, only coincidence. Only what I know in my bones. So once Allison reaches her majority, I will release him and give myself to the courts for accounting.”

“Like hell you will,” Peter stated flatly.

Melissa looked up from where she was packing her things away. “See? He is sensible.” She walked over and patted Peter maternally on the arm. “You we like. You can stay.” Then she frowned down at her bag. “Sire, there is still no change in the samples. Lydia and I have been working on some variations to the formula, but as of now I cannot say with certainty that —”

“Oh,” Peter breathed. “Your father is the patient. Our guinea pig for the cure.”

“There *is* no cure!” Gerard spit the words out. “It is just another delusion of an insane traitor! The Undead cannot be undone!”

Neither of them paid him any mind as Chris nodded sharply. “It is unjust. I am aware. And there will be an accounting come due. But I am willing to pay it.”

Peter made an aggravated sound from the back of his throat. “You should be glad Talia sent me. You need someone with a little less scruples to protect you from *yourself*.”

“I *am* glad Talia sent you,” Chris exclaimed baldly.

Peter blinked several times and hissed in a breath and the growl from Chris’ throat perfectly matched Peter’s earlier aggravation.

“Christ. Peter—” He caught hold of Peter’s wrist and pulled him from the room, pushing him against the rough stone of the wall and forcing him to look him in the eye. “Listen to me. Whatever other reasons Talia might have had, she sent you here to protect *you*, not your family. If you believe nothing else, believe that.

“I am grateful...*grateful* she wrote to me of you. And I should have told you of the letter a long time ago, no matter what she wanted. My duty is to you, not her.” He knew immediately he had misstepped by using that word, as Peter’s jaw

tightened and he moved to knock Chris hand from his shoulder. Chris caught it and as gently as possible lowered it back to Peter's side.

"No. Listen...*listen*. I am grateful she wrote to me of you, but please understand...her request would have bought you my courtesy, a fine room and fine clothing...all the respect due to your position as prince consort. It would have given you what likely would have amounted to a gilded cage. But *this*," he cupped Peter's cheek, refusing to be daunted by the tiny flinch Peter made when he touched him, "the way I look to you to seek your opinion, the way I can be elbows deep in accounts and the thought of you comes to mind and the burden somehow seems lighter," he dragged his thumb along Peter's jaw, his voice growing rougher, "the way I hunger for you night and day, *that* is for you and you alone. Because of only you and who and what you are. Not your family name, not the treaty, not any other arrangement. *You*."

Peter looked as if he were poised on a knife's edge, as if he did not know which way to go, as if one false move from Chris could push him to the wrong side. As if he *wanted* to believe Chris but did not know how. Chris pressed his forehead to Peter's.

"Peter," he said, "I do not know what it was that caused your parents to fail so badly in their role as—"

"I do," Peter murmured, voice barely more than a whisper, barely audible at all. "I know. Talia doesn't, but I do. My father told me once when I was eleven, when he was too deep into his cups. I do not think he even remembers. I wish to God I did not."

He raised his head and said abruptly, "I am not his son." A laugh bordering on the hysterical escaped him. "They did not even send you a *Hale*, prince! You should have seen how fast my father grasped hold to the exchange. He didn't even have to give anything up! Could he have insulted your family name more?"

As if Chris cared one bit about Peter's bloodline. The Argents had been nothing but soldiers when they'd dug their heels into Befastia. But he did care about the expression on Peter's face. "Your mother had a—"

"She was forced," Peter said plainly. "My father even told me the man's name. But he sat too highly for my father to ever demand satisfaction, not to mention my mother's reputation would have been smeared forever. He chose to protect

her name instead.”

Chris well remembered Peter’s comments about the aristocracy’s abuse of power, and it was easy enough to put two and two together. And yet something still made no sense.

“But in such cases, does not the woman usually —”

“Retire to the country for her confinement? Have her child and send it away and return with no one the wiser? Oh, they had every intention, prince. But that is where Talia comes in. She overheard their discussion, nosy thing that she was, and at seven, the only thing she understood was that my mother was to have a child. A sibling for her. A playmate. And she told the secret to the servants. Who told other servants. Who told their masters and mistresses. And after that, there was only one thing my father could do.”

“Claim you as his own,” Chris said quietly.

“Yes. Claim me as their own and pray that I died in her womb. And they *did* pray. My father told me how they prayed. How they made offerings to the church and counted rosaries and *prayed* I might cease life before I was even born. But as you can see, God was not listening that day, and they were forced to do all diligence to me as to any son in order to hide her shame. I used to wonder why my mother turned away from my kisses, did not lift me up in her arms as other mothers did. Why it was Talia, or the servants, who were left to bandage my wounds and wipe my tears. My father explained it to me.”

Chris could see it in his mind’s eye: Peter, young and new and trembling, unable to look away as Lord Hale carelessly tore him to pieces in a drunken rage. And he had to fight hard to swallow his fury, to keep it from his face, because he was afraid Peter would read it as disgust.

“Peter, Peter, Peter,” he said softly, cradling Peter’s face in his hands and rolling his forehead against his. Peter jerked his head away, staring at the wall behind them rather than at Chris.

“So you see, Christopher, they cannot be blamed. It is not their fault. No one could love such a child as that. No one should.”

“*You* are not to blame for what happened to your mother. A child cannot be

blamed for that, Peter. You are not your conception, no matter what your father may say.”

“Am I not?” Peter spat out viciously, slamming a closed fist against his chest. “Is it not in the violence that has twisted in the beat of my heart for as long as I can remember? Is it not in the disdain I feel for my fellow man? Is it not in my very nature that denies me the natural desires of a man for a woman? Am I *not* the very manifestation of the horror of that act?”

“*Stop.*” Chris bared his teeth, raw harshness coloring his tone so deeply that Peter started and then stilled, wide eyed and skittish. “No one speaks of my husband that way. Not even my husband.” He gave Peter a small shake. “Shall we then attribute your intelligence to it? Your wit? The care you take with Allison? Just how much power, Peter, are you willing to give it? To give *them*? You are better than they; for what other reason would you have fought and kicked against pricks for so long? You are too great to be contained by their shallow notions.”

Peter made a small noise, something caught between a choked laugh and a sob, and Chris slid his hands back up to cup his face once more. This time Peter did not pull away. Chris was not so foolish as to think he could undo a lifetime of damage in a single moment, but he would be damned if he didn’t make Peter understand at least this. “You are Peter Argent, Prince Consort of Befastia. I do not care what blood runs in your veins, I do not care what mistakes you may have committed. I only care that you are mine, and that our lives are better because you came!”

“You are a fool,” Peter said, but there was softness around his eyes and a slight tremble in his hand when he lifted it to cover one of Chris’. There was fear, and disbelief, and a hope so small it looked like it wounded Peter to even feel it, and Chris gathered his courage to lay his soul at his feet. He thought that, in this thing, it would be him who would have to lead.

“Perhaps it is so,” he said, “but I am a fool who loves you.”

If he had thought Peter was still before, now he could no longer be sure he was even *breathing*. He rushed forward, fumbling at his words. “I wanted—” He hastily dug in his pocket to pull out the small box he had stowed, “I was going to give this to you today. I have long regretted the necessity of such a carelessly

chosen token as I gave you when we exchanged vows. I would that you had something that better represented my feelings.” He retrieved the ring and let the box drop to the floor. “Peter,” he held the ring, with its two rubies that framed a delicately engraved wolf wrapped around a stylized full moon, the ancient sigil of the Argent house, between his thumb and forefinger, “If we could re-write this, if we had been given a choice, if I had known all of this before and had the choice of you or Talia or anyone else, *I would still choose you.*”

He licked his lips and pushed forward. “And I believe - I *hope* - that with enough time, you might bring yourself to feel the same.”

Peter shook his head and, eyes closed, let it fall back against the wall. Chris felt his heart plummet to his toes and began to cautiously withdraw, fist closing around the ring as he prepared to retreat to lick his wounds. Time was on his side, he reminded himself. They could begin anew tomorrow.

But then Peter darted his hand out and caught Chris’. “You idiot,” he said, eyes opening to reveal so much exasperated affection that all the air whooshed from Chris’ lungs. “I don’t *need* time. Now give me the damned ring.”

Chris’ laugh was relieved and just a touch hysterical and he nodded, turning Peter’s hand over and removing the plain gold band before sliding the new one on. Peter examined it with a small smile before asking archly, “Does this mean I am forever fated to chase after you, howling?”

Chris leaned in, brushing Peter’s lips with his before whispering against his mouth. “More likely I shall forever be running to catch up.”

“I will eventually disappoint you, Christopher,” Peter warned, even as his hands found Chris’ shoulders and pulled him closer. “It is inevitable. You will regret —”

Chris chose the most expedient method to end the argument, stopping Peter’s mouth with his own. Peter was still trying to talk when Chris sucked his bottom lip into his mouth, but whatever nonsense he had been saying melted away into a moan. Chris was relentless, not pulling away until Peter was clutching at him and every bit of tension had melted from his muscles. Then Chris merely skimmed from his lips to his jaw to his ear.

“Now who is being the fool? *Hush*, and trust that I know my own heart.”

“If you have not figured out by now that I will never be obedient...”

Chris smirked into Peter’s skin. “Then it is good I have never been interested in a biddable partner.”

“Good indeed, Prince.”

A throat cleared beside them, and Chris reluctantly pulled his head from the crook of Peter’s neck to look at Melissa, who was poking her head from the doorway. “Is it settled then? Because I have other patients to see, and frankly, your father’s continual predictions of doom are making my head ache.”

Chris grimaced ruefully. “My apologies. You should not have been forced to hear so private a moment.”

She snorted as she closed the door behind her and stepped around them. “The entire palace has been witness to this awkward dance. Trust me when I say finally having some resolution will be worth the discomfort.”

She disappeared around the corner and Peter looked at Chris and blinked. “Did she just insult us? I feel fairly certain she just insulted us.”

Chris took Peter’s hand. “Come. I have it on good authority cook was planning a breakfast spread worthy of the holiday.” On cue, Peter’s stomach rumbled.

“Christ, Christopher! And you are just now informing me? We shall be lucky if Allison has left us a scone between us! And that is not even accounting for those two bacon brained women!”

“Forgive me my distraction.”

“Only if there is food left.”

A flash of movement caught Chris eye as they turned back the way they came, but closer inspection revealed only one of the old fashioned torches flickering in a draft. He had always intended to get them replaced with the more modern gas lamps, but his father’s imprisonment had necessitated a delay for the time being.

“What was it, then,” Peter asked as they emerged back into the sitting room and Chris sealed the mirror behind them, “that really happened at breakfast that first

day? That necessitated Captain Stilinski fabricating a tale of two brawling soldiers?”

“Two brawling—? He really said that?”

“Mmm,” Peter nodded. “I believe I put him on the spot. I knew something was off, though, when you told me you had punished no soldiers with the pass in recent years.”

“Ah.” Chris looked to the ballroom as they passed out of the wing. It wouldn’t be such a chore to bring it back into use, not if it would make Peter happy. It was time to stop living in a tomb. “My father...sometimes grows violent. Abusive. He has occasionally injured staff in his attempts to escape. It comes on suddenly, unpredictably. Melissa thinks he has a sickness of the brain. That day he came very close to bludgeoning a serving woman.” He shook his head. “He wasn’t even trying to escape. And he did not seem to remember it at all when he came to.”

Peter shrugged. “I suppose we could get lucky and he could simply die.” He shot Chris an apologetic look. “I am sorry. He is your father.”

“It’s nothing I haven’t thought before, God forgive me.” He privately thought similarly about Lord Hale. It was a good thing distance and weather made it impossible to storm the Hale estate. He knew people thought he was some kind of bastion of even temperedness, but he could be incredibly petty when the slights involved people he cared for.

Kali was waiting outside the sitting room door, leaned against the door frame with her arms crossed moodily. She straightened when she saw them, examining them critically as they approached.

“Thank goodness,” she finally said, letting out a relieved sigh. “Jennifer was starting to make *plans*. Your highness, you *know* you do not want my wife making plans.”

She was entirely correct. He and Peter were like to have been drugged over dinner and then woken to find themselves locked in a tiny attic room, sans clothes, until they reconciled. Jennifer was dangerous like that.

Allison popped out of the room, mouth drawn too tight and eyes worried as they

searched his. “Father, is something wrong?”

It was Peter who answered, walking over to ruffle Allison’s hair as she swatted at his hand in protest. “Everything’s fine, beastie. No need to worry.”

“Oh,” she said, looking nonplussed for a moment before it sunk in. Then she brightened. “Good.” She looked very seriously at Peter, leaning close as if she were prepared to share a deep secret. “My father is very stubborn at times, you understand. You must be very patient with him.”

Chris barked out a helpless peal of laughter as Peter nodded gravely to her. “I will do my best, princess.”

She inclined her head, the very picture of royalty accepting their due, and then she side eyed him from beneath her lashes. “I ate all of the eclairs.”

“Dammit, Christopher!” Peter crossed his arms grumpily over his chest, and if he’d been just a bit younger, Chris fully expected he would have stamped his foot. “I *told* you she would do it!” The twinkle in his eye told a different story, though, and Chris burst out laughing as he threw an arm around Peter’s shoulder and put a hand on Allison’s and guided them through the doorway on Kali’s heels.

For once all was right in his world.

Chapter 10

Peter woke sprawled over Chris, his nose buried in his collarbone and Chris' arms wrapped around him. He would never, ever admit it, even now, but it was becoming his favorite position in which to wake. Oh, how far the mighty had fallen. He was still not entirely convinced this whole thing wasn't going to blow up in his face, but Christ, Chris was so earnest in *his* conviction that Peter couldn't *not* want it. Could not resist reaching for it with both hands. He was too selfish by nature to do otherwise.

"Merry Christmas." Chris' voice was sleep rough and lazy and sent a shiver all the way down Peter's spine. He dragged his hand up Peter's back and buried it in his hair as he rubbed their cheeks together, guaranteeing Peter would carry beard burn for half the day. He suspected Chris rather liked marking him up, in defiance of the civilized facade he presented to his subjects every day.

Peter hummed low, refusing to move from his comfortable position. "We're turning into heathens with how often you have me sleeping naked."

He could hear Chris' amusement. "I could get you a night shirt if you would like."

"No," Peter said primly, "I suppose I will survive."

Chris' chest rumbled with a laugh, and then he tugged at Peter's hair until Peter was forced to lift his head and look at him. Grumpily.

"Peter." Chris' voice was strangely hesitant for a man who was the most sure person Peter had ever met. Peter cocked an eyebrow and Chris met his gaze, eyes open and longing. Well at least he could be sure the man wasn't planning on taking back everything he had said yesterday.

"You mentioned something yesterday. About how you would like to—"

"Your highness! Your highness!" Finstock's voice was clearly telegraphed, long before he actually threw the door open and entered their *bedroom*. "Your highness!" He was clearly out of breath, panic exuding from every pore.

Chris scrambled for the sheet to cover him, and Peter found it vaguely adorable

he was so concerned for his modesty. “What’s the meaning of this, Robert?”

“There is a fire!” And as soon as he said the words, Peter could smell it, acrid and sharp and bitter. “A fire in the west wing. In the *passage*.”

Chris was leaping from the bed before Finstock had finished, uncaring of his nudity even as Finstock carefully averted his eyes. Peter followed suit, catching the small clothes and trousers Chris tossed to him from the wardrobe.

“Gather my guard. Have them organize the household and soldiers available. Evacuate the—”

“It is already done, your highness. Buckets are already filled and out. I had Marin take Allison to triage before I came. I thought that would be your wish.”

Chris nodded curtly. “Where in the tunnel is the blaze?”

Chris’ face was solemn and terrible and Peter buttoned his pants and put a hand on the bare skin of his back.

Finstock could not quite meet his gaze. “We cannot reach his room, Sire. The flames are too great.” Chris cursed, jerking his boots on without bothering with stockings.

“Evacuate everyone not directly fighting the blaze. McCall is taking care of the horses?” Finstock nodded, and at Peter’s questioning look, Chris explained. “The tunnels run underneath the stables. If anything collapses, the stables will be the casualty.”

Peter supposed that was good, all things considered. The palace would not be structurally damaged, as long as they could contain the flames. He posed his own question as he finished pulling on his boots. “Do we have any idea how it happened?”

Finstock shook his head, again avoiding looking at Chris. “No. But considering the King’s history—”

“He likely started the flames himself,” Chris finished grimly. “The torches would make it easy enough. *Goddamn* him,” he growled. “How did he escape his room?” Then he dismissed the question himself with a flick of his wrist.

“Questions for a later time.” He took off at a dead run out the door, and Peter followed on his heels.

The smoke was thicker in the main hall, and a long string of people stretched forward and back, the tail disappearing out through the kitchen - presumably to the water reserves outside the stables - and the head snaking away into the west wing. A bucket brigade, filled with a mix of soldiers, townspeople, and members of the household Finstock had not managed to shoo away.

Chris strode straightway toward the smoke, although he paused to put a hand on a shoulder here, or speak a quiet word of encouragement there. As he passed, people stood a bit taller, planted their feet a bit firmer. After a moment, Peter hesitantly followed suit, gingerly bending his head to speak to a soldier with short cropped hair whose name he vaguely remembered as Eaddy or Eddie or something similar.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely. “Be careful.”

She smiled briefly before grabbing a bucket from the man behind her. “You are welcome, prince consort. She glanced up the line at Chris. “You may want to tell him to do the same.”

“Mmm, yes. He does seem to rush where angels fear to trod, doesn’t he?”

They shared a look of commiseration before he moved on, although he thought he heard her murmur as he passed, “Wait until you see him at the pass.” He buried his consternation at that and concentrated on quickening his stride to catch up with the man in question, continuing to fill his duty as Chris’ consort by encouraging those he passed. He was nowhere near as effective as Chris, who seemed to exude calm no matter where he went, but he thought he helped at least a little.

As they entered the west wing itself, the smoke became unbearable and Peter could finally hear the roar of the fire, loud and angry; men and women had wet pieces of cloth tied over their mouths to keep from being overcome. Chris tapped two men on the shoulder and spoke into their ears. They untied their face coverings and handed them over before leaving the line and heading back the way Chris and Peter had come. The gap they left immediately closed in and Chris handed one of the rags to Peter and then tied the other over his face. Peter followed suit and although the smoke stung his eyes, he no longer felt in danger

of suffocating.

Chris grabbed Finstock by the arm. “Make sure these people are rotated out with those at the back. We don’t want anyone dying from this.” Finstock gave a sharp nod and sprinted out into the main hall, hair waving wildly as he went.

The sitting room was nearly black with smoke, and there was charred wood all along the wall where the mirror sat open, evidence of where the flames had spread before being beaten back. The space immediately inside the sloping hall was clear as well, but beyond that a wall of fire burned so bright that Peter knew there was no way anyone could be alive in the corridors. He was unsurprised to see Kali and Jennifer at the head of the line, dressed in rough trousers and men’s shirts and faces smudged with ash. Chris and Peter joined them, grabbing two wet sacks and stepping inside to beat at the flames as Kali took a bucket from Jennifer and threw it onto the blaze.

For a long time there was nothing but heat and ash and long, gasping breaths. Peter’s arms ached and his lungs burned, and after awhile it was almost as if he were moving in a dream, hands dunking sacks repetitively in buckets of ice cold water that were always replenished every time the water grew remotely warm. He could barely feel his fingers any longer, and he was almost tempted to shove them into the flames to get some relief. Would Chris still want him then, he thought absently, when he was scarred and disfigured? If he were twisted and burned and no longer handsome to look upon?

Chris chose that moment to look over his shoulder at him, his eyes crinkling through the ash in a way that let Peter know he was grinning wildly beneath his face cloth. Yes, the answer came to him suddenly. Chris was just the kind of stupid idiot to do such a thing. He smiled back, just as stupidly, before being seized by a coughing fit and doubling over.

Chris was at his side in an instant, wrapping arms around his waist and holding him steady. “You need to go out, Peter. Get some fresh air.”

Peter shook his head. “No, I’m fine. We’re making headway.” The fire had been beaten back another few feet, reclaiming stone walls stained black. “I’m fine.”

“Peter—”

“No,” he straightened. “Not until you go out as well.” He swept an arm behind

him. “Everyone has changed out at least twice.”

“Not Kali and Jennifer.”

Peter rolled his eyes and dunked his sack back in the water. “Of course not. Because they’re just as insane as—”

“Prince Argent, *Prince Argent!*” Sergeant Reyes burst through the line, Lahey and Boyd on her heels. They were gasping for air and, unlike everyone else, completely armed. “We found Maxwell and Charles at the south gate. Their throats were ripped out.”

It only took Peter a second to come to the obvious conclusion, but Chris was quicker. “It was a diversion. The fire is a *diversion*. Our gates are unguarded, our soldiers are unarmed and we are under attack! Soldiers!” He bellowed, “Soldiers leave the line! Get to the barracks, to the armory, to wherever you are able to find a —”

A scream tore through the hallway, followed by another, and then both were abruptly cut off.

“We’re too late,” Chris breathed, and Peter could see the ghosts in his eyes, the ghosts of everything he had been too late to prevent eleven years ago.

“Christopher, we’re not too late. We’re not!” He whirled to the two women behind them. “Keep everyone in here fighting the flames. We cannot afford to let it take the palace. Boyd! Reyes! Take Chris’ guard and keep the wing safe at whatever cost! Christopher!” Chris stood immobilized, caught in some kind of vision Peter could not see. “Christopher! I cannot do this alone! I need you to focus! I need you to *tell me what to do!*”

There was a minute pause and then Chris started, snapping back to the present and giving Peter a grateful look. “Jennifer, Kali! Find Allison!” The women were already out the door by the time he finished, Jennifer grabbing a candlestick from the table as she went. Chris and Peter sprinted after them, Chris yelling, “Soldiers, to me! Make your way however you can! The kitchen will have blades!”

They tumbled out of the west wing and into a war zone.

* * * * *

Peter had heard the stories, of course - every child from the Treaty families were raised on them - as well as the actual facts he had learned since coming to Befastia, but nothing could have prepared him for the reality. Beside him he heard Chris order, "Soldiers! Whatever you do, make sure the water line *holds!*" but he was too caught up in the chaos surrounding him to pay it much mind.

They were men, he thought, but not men. Jaws too long, too bulging, making way for sharp, spiked teeth that shone whenever they opened their mouths to bite or claw or growl. Too hairy, even for the hairiest of men, with nails like knife points, and eyes that shone unnaturally blue or yellow or, in a few cases, fiery red. As he watched, one picked up a soldier and, before anyone could act at all, dropped him on his knee and snapped his back.

Before he could even react, a man-not-man was immediately in front of him, all snapping jaws and bright eyes. He ducked, barely saving himself from having his head taken off. He grabbed the first thing he could lay hands on, a chair, and flung it hard, catching it (he...she...there was really no way to be sure) across the chest and knocking it down.

Chris swept in and picked up the fallen chair, smashing it against a wall so that it splintered and then picking up a leg in either hand. He twirled them and then dropped down, snapping them out to take the feet from under another of the Undead, and when its back hit the floor, Chris fell to his knees at its head, stabbing both chair legs down and impaling it through the throat. Then he retrieved the other two legs and pitched them over his shoulder to Peter. Without having to look. "Hurry! We need to get to our swords! We have to stop them from reaching the town!"

The small part of Peter that wasn't immediately concerned with staying alive was unaccountably aroused by the display, something he would need to examine thoroughly on another day. Preferably a day when he wasn't in imminent danger of *dying*. A line of soldiers guarded the water brigade, fighting with chairs and lamps and butchers' knives - anything they could get their hands on - while the rest of them fought their way out of the main hall. Peter and Chris had a shorter distance to go - their weapons were in the family wing. The only thing stopping them was a dozen or so ravening undead blocking the stairway. Nothing to worry about at *all*.

He slammed the back end of a chair leg up into an undead chest, knocking the air out its lungs and then sliding it between a rib. It didn't come close to killing it, but it did cause it to stumble back long enough so that Peter could take off after Chris at a run, closing the distance that had grown between them.

A shrill, ear piercing war cry shattered the chaos of the room, startling both human and undead alike, and out of nowhere Kali came, running across the battlefield at full speed. She leapt, landing on the back of an undead who was in the process of snapping its teeth at an unfortunate serving boy's neck. Her arms went about its head, and with a swift twist of her torso, she snapped its neck clean. She jumped back and rolled away as it fell, shouting "*Jennifer!*" as she sprang to her feet.

Jennifer materialized beside her, a cooking cleaver held in her fist, and in one fell swoop she separated its head from its body. Then she grabbed Kali's hand and the two of them took off toward the triage center in the courtyard, to find Allison and get her to safety. Peter didn't even have time to shake his head in bemusement before he and Chris were beset again, and the task of keeping themselves whole and unbitten consumed them for the next several moments.

His hands were bloody by the time they reached the staircase, and he had lost track of the number of things he had seen Chris use as weapons. Eaddy's words earlier were making more sense. There was an incredibly violent side of Chris he had never seen before, that Chris had kept carefully hidden while within the civilized walls of his palace, and yet nothing about the bloodthirsty intensity on his face caused the slightest bit of fear in Peter's breast. Because he was certain that, no matter what, that violence would only be used to protect him, would never be truly aimed at him.

He punched a snarling beast in the nose, hearing a crunch before he took the lamp shard Chris tossed him and shoved it into its heart. He doubted it would die, but for now it dropped with a thud and the path up the stairs was clear.

Chris turned and grinned madly, teeth white and fierce in a face stained with blood and ash. Then the smile dropped away, replaced by a look of horror as he stared at something over Peter's shoulder. Peter whirled around. It took him a moment to pinpoint exactly what it was, amid all the myriad horrors, that had shaken Chris so, but then he saw it. Saw Kali and Jennifer running pell mell through the combatants, barely stopping to shoulder one person or the other

person aside in their quest to reach them. But it wasn't their single mindedness that shook him.

It was the fact they were empty handed. That they had been tasked with finding Allison, and they were returning, sprinting hell bent for leather, empty handed.

They skidded to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, and Jennifer heaved in a breath. "Prince," she said quietly, as if death were not being dealt all about them, "Allison is gone."

"Gone?" Chris' face was the color of powder, but his voice was just as quiet. "Triage was over run then?" Peter's hand tightened around the banister and his knuckles turned white. Not Allison. Not Allison.

"No." Kali's skin was ashen under its darkness and her lips were the color of blood. "The hoard has not even come close to reaching it. Prince," she breathed, eyes wary and full of caution, "they said the *King* fetched her."

Chris cursed, two bright spots of color rising high on his cheeks. "Tell anyone... anyone of whose loyalty we are assured that we are at rebellion. Tell them we are overthrowing the king and establishing Allison to the throne. Tell them we fight a three headed dragon today and it must be defeated at all costs. At all cost but her."

The women nodded sharply and then Chris whirled about and bolted up the stairs. He bellowed over his shoulder as he went. "Peter! Peter, *hurry!* Time is short!" as if Peter wasn't already at his heels. They crashed through the door to Chris' outer rooms and it was Peter who made it to the racks first, tossing Chris' sword to him first before grabbing his own.

"Where would he have taken her? Into the town? The ice caves perhaps?" Peter fumbled at the sword belt desperately, with fingers that had suddenly become clumsy and thick. "What can possibly be his endgame? He has to know the people will rally to *you*."

Chris shook his head. "The palace, perhaps, but if there are no survivors—"

"—then no one will know."

"And he had very little dealings with the gentry or the townspeople. Trust me

when I tell you he knows how to spin his words. If he can destroy my inner circle—”

“—there will be no one to say otherwise. How? *How?* How is he in control? How did he even get loose?”

Chris’ face was grim. “I do not know the one, and as to the other, it is as it always is. Someone I trusted believed he was the better deal.”

That was someone Peter was going to make sure died a bloody, painful death. Just as soon as they found Allison. And defeated Lucien’s army. And took down Gerard. But then. Oh, *then*...

Unlike Chris, Peter had no aversion to making people suffer.

Chris was strapping a set of daggers to his wrists, and Peter left him to it, darting across to his own rooms. When he returned, Chris was already halfway out the door.

“No,” Peter forbade, “you go nowhere without me. Do you understand? We do this together. I will not have you killed because you have rushed off half cocked with no one at your back!”

“Then I suggest you stay with me. I cannot wait, Peter. Not if Gerard has All-” He choked on his words, and Peter watched as he forcibly swallowed the panic down, bottled it up until there was nothing left of him but the soldier. “If he has Allison, we cannot spare the seconds even to breathe.”

“Then let us stop discussing, and *go*.” Chris took him at his word, and, appropriately armed at last, they headed away from the sounds of the fighting and toward the passageways the servants took to come and go without notice. “But we still have to find her, Christopher. We still have to figure out where he would secret her away.”

“I know where he is.” They had reached the alcove that disguised the small, concealed door to the servant stairs, and Chris’ lip curled into a sneer as they both drew swords. “My father has always had a penchant for the dramatic. The number of times he has quoted Shakespeare before a battle would make you ill.” At Peter’s nod, Chris flung the door to the narrow stairway open and Peter moved into the opening with sword held ready. They were met with no

resistance, however, only the echoes of their own boots and breathing, and Chris took the lead as they crept down single file.

Talking could no longer be risked when they did not know to whom their voices might carry, and Peter put aside his curiosity to concentrate on listening for anything that might indicate they were being followed. One foot cautiously in front of the other they crept, going far slower than Peter would wish, as much as he understood the need. And if the pace was driving *him* insane, he could only imagine what it was doing to Chris. Peter had no reassurances to offer him, no promises that any deity would ensure Allison's safe return. *Ex deus machina* only appeared in fairy tales and on the stage, and Chris had to know as well as he that the odds were stacked against them.

Like as not, the day would end with their deaths, but as Chris had so poetically told him weeks ago, dying was what Argents *did*, and Peter supposed he was, all things considered, an Argent now. Not that he meant to go gracefully, or calmly, or any of the ways Chris no doubt did, but if dying was what it took, then so be it. He would simply be spiteful enough to take as many bodies with him as he could.

But he really did hope it didn't come to that.

One moment they were descending, and then the next moment he was slamming into Chris' back. He realized they had reached the landing without him noticing, which might possibly have happened because he had been too busy ruminating on how he had somehow let his self serving streak be ruined by Christopher Argent and his bratling daughter to pay proper attention. But he wasn't going to admit that any time soon.

Chris cast a concerned look over his shoulder. Peter shrugged innocently and then tilted his head toward the passage that ran perpendicular to the stair. "Clear?" he mouthed soundlessly.

Chris nodded, and stepped out into the hall. The silence was suffocating, made all the more disjointed by the fact Peter knew a war was waging just a few walls behind them. That such peace could exist in the depths of battle was as big a sign of all that was unfair in the world as any. If there was any justice, the very foundations of the palace would be shaking underneath the weight of what was happening here today.

The walls of the passageway were dotted, at irregular intervals, by doors, discreet entryways into various rooms so that servants could enter and exit without being seen, likely covered on the other side by tapestries or statues. Remnants from an earlier age, when Befastia's rulers took their positions far more seriously, took the trappings and accouterments of power and royalty as necessity, because it was their way to claim legitimacy, to prove they were worthy of the title. There was a reason Peter had always demanded every iota of pomp and circumstance due the son of a powerful title.

He had never seen Chris demand a servant use anything other than the main door since he had arrived in Befastia.

Chris stopped at one said door and put his hand on the latch. He did not open it. Instead his shoulders slumped and his head bowed, and he drew in a deep breath. Peter was not sure if he was steeling himself to see his father or steeling himself against the possibility they were too late, so he simply placed his hand on Chris shoulder.

"We can do this." He moved closer and pressed his lips to the nape of Chris' neck. "We will do this."

After a moment Chris nodded, and his shoulders straightened again. "Yes," he said in answer, "we will. Peter, be watchful. My father may be old, but do not underestimate him. He is treacherous, far past his physical appearance. He will twist the knife before he stabs it deeper."

Peter's lips curled ugly against Chris' skin. "You forget who you are talking to, prince. I think your father's methods and mine likely run in similar veins."

"You are nothing like my father, Peter. *Nothing.*"

Peter chose not to argue. Not now. "What is it, exactly, that is behind this door?"

Chris snorted, shaking his head, and turning the latch. "What else? The throne room

* * * * *

Up until they emerged from behind the tapestry, a part of Peter had doubted Chris' ironclad confidence in Gerard's location. With a hundred different rooms,

not to mention an entire *country*, there was no way he could be so sure of Gerard's predictability, especially if his father was as wily as Chris claimed.

Peter had never been in the formal throne room, because Chris never used it. He had only ever been in the audience chambers that first day, when he had been presented and wed. Chris' inability to utilize the privilege at his fingertips had been one of the first things about him that had confounded Peter. It certainly wasn't the last.

The room was ostentatious to the point of vulgarity, the first he had seen in the entire palace. It was gilded from top to bottom, as ornate as any room he had ever seen in Versailles, but colored in silvers and blues rather than pastels. Thick, silver threaded carpet led a path up to the raised dais, and there, sitting ramrod straight upon the throne, was Gerard, a fur robe about his shoulders and a *crown* upon his head. Chris had never worn a crown, not once, not even during the ceremony of Peter's arrival. The tips of Gerard's fingers were stained with dried blood, thick and flaking to the ground, and at the foot of the throne was a sword, steel still gleaming and strangely clean, as if it had been carelessly tossed there as an afterthought.

He was the only person in the room. Allison was nowhere to be seen.

There was no surprise on his face at their appearance, even though he had been looking right at the tapestry when they'd emerged. If anything, he looked as if he had been *expecting* them.

"Hello, my son." Gerard's voice was jovial, carefree. "It took you longer than I expected." His eyes flicked over Peter dismissively. "I suppose your catamite slowed you down."

"His name is *Peter*." The fury in Chris' voice was boiling over, as he crossed the space between the the wall and the dais, sword held carefully across his chest. "And he is my *husband*. Father, *what have you done?*"

Gerard's laugh was dry and wheezing. "So you truly have grown attached. I had hoped for otherwise, but as usual, you continue to disappoint. If you hadn't been such a continual disappointment, this could all have happened very differently. With much less bloodshed. So understand all of these deaths are on your hands."

"Keep a civil tongue in your mouth," Peter growled. "Or I will rip it out."

“Oh, I doubt that very much,” Gerard said silkily. “Likely it will be the other way around.”

“How could you do this to your people?” The rage underlying Chris’ words was laced with hurt. “You swore an *oath*.”

Gerard tapped his fingers on the arm of the throne. “I swore an oath to rule. To protect this kingdom. Not a bunch of pathetic nations who have benefited from our deaths for far too long without cost. We serve when we should rule. And we will. Rule them all. Or rather, *I* will.”

“My god,” Chris breathed, “Melissa was right. You truly are insane. How are you doing this? How are you working with them? Do you not understand they will rip you to pieces as soon as they have taken the kingdom?”

“My head has never been clearer.” Gerard lifted his hand and pondered it, curling his fingers down to examine his nails. “When this is done, the kingdoms will be joined and we will take the continent. Take our rightful place as rulers of the herd. As the Argents always should have been had we not given our power to a bunch of sniveling *women*. But your concern for my welfare is touching. So let me allay that.

“We do not kill our own.”

Peter’s heart skipped a beat as Chris froze in his steady stalk to the dais. “What are you talking about?”

The blood on Gerard’s finger tips began to make horrifying sense as he smiled wide, showing his teeth as he spread his fingers. His nails slowly lengthened until they became claws and a mouthful of elongated teeth peeled back his lips. His canines overtook them all, curving down to the dent of his chin in fangs, and he growled, low, his eyes flashing to red.

“No,” Chris’ denial was hushed and horrified, and weaker than true disbelief. “The undead cannot disguise themselves. They cannot walk among us!” He swung his sword up, changing from defense to offense, and Peter followed suit.

“Do you really think we are all like that rabble out there? Oh my son, there is so much you do not know. So much you never will know, since you have forced my hand.”

“How long? *How long?*” Chris edged forward, inch by inch, and while Gerard was focused on him, Peter backed away, trying to circle around behind the dais without catching Gerard’s eye.

“Hmm...” Gerard tapped his chin, claws retracting without any seeming effort and a small smile playing about his lips. “Let me see... How long has it been again since you killed that bitch wife of yours? Let’s just settle on a little before that.”

“You’re *lying*--”

“—And you can go ahead and lay that one on your shoulders as well. It would have been so much easier..so much simpler if you had just let us penetrate the border of the first district. No one there of consequence to lose. But you just *had* to play hero. Really, though, redirecting worked out for the best in the end. Let me get rid of that slattern once and for all. And with Claudia as the bonus!”

“-No! The pass was not breached!” While the denial was still strong in Chris’ voice, it was almost *too* strong. Almost like a play now, with a written script. It hit Peter that despite the turmoil Chris must be feeling, despite the confusion and anger and despair they must be bringing him, he was still focused enough to do his best to distract Gerard’s attention, to keep him from noticing how close Peter was creeping.

“Yes, Christopher. *Yes*. Your mother, your sister, your *wife*. One by one I have destroyed every bit of weakness in you. And yet you keep bringing them in. Do you really believe the passage in the west wing is the only one our ancestors built? In their paranoia and desperation to survive? Do you really think they would not have built escape routes everywhere into the earth? Even to the very mountains? I taught you what you needed to know, my son, not all that there was to know.”

Peter was so close. Only meters away now. “Then why? Why wait? Why not continue the assault and kill us all then?”

“Well, you *did* beat them back. I was very proud of you. Such bad odds and yet you prevailed. I taught you well. And you were so *biddable* afterward. The undead are patient. Long range planners. They’ve been planning ever since we first came, you understand. It was wiser to wait. Let me mold you. Let you *breed*. I need heirs, after all, and my rutting days are done.”

“My God, that was what it was all about then, wasn’t it? The demand I remarry. The demand we send out to the Hales to fulfill the *treaty*.”

“I thought you would do it on your own, at least have the grace to give us a bastard, but you crossed me even in that. The Hales are of strong stock. You and Talia’s son would have been *strong*. And once Allison was out of the way, mine to mold. Only you betrayed me, and the Hale’s betrayed the treaty-”

Rich, Peter thought, coming from the man who was planning to betray them all.

“— And if you were truly my son you would have thrown that by-blow out to die in the snow at the insult. But you gave him our *name*, and took him into your *bed*, and if he does not stop in his tracks *right now*-” he whipped his head around and his crimson eyes bore into Peter, “—Allison will be dead *sooner* rather than *later*.”

Peter froze, as did Chris.

“Good.” Gerard was all congenial and grandfatherly smiles again. He gestured toward Chris. “Now be a good boy and go back and join my son.” Peter ground his teeth but did as Gerard commanded. “Now drop the swords.”

Peter was prepared to do just that, but Chris, surprisingly, objected. “We have no proof she still lives, *Father*. I do not think I am prepared to disarm myself on your word.”

“A compelling argument. Very well. And I suppose I owe you something. If you hadn’t decided to pet your dirty-dish’s bruised ego, it would have taken Deucalion much longer to find me. The Bishop was only able to get word I was imprisoned, but you were too careful to let him know where.”

“*What?*” Peter gripped his hilt so tight the threads cut into his palm. There was a muffled cry and a scuffle of feet and then Deucalion stepped out from behind a curtain, dragging Allison, still in her nightgown, along with him. His hand was over her mouth and his dagger was at her throat, and his smile was the cruelest Peter had ever seen. Rather than fear, Allison’s eyes were *furious* and he could see her fingers working steadily to reach into her sleeve, to where a dagger would be strapped if she were fully dressed. Except she was her father’s son, and her mother’s, so of *course* she would have grabbed a weapon before she’d even thought to grab clothes. From the corner of his eye he saw Chris look steady at

her with a tiny nod.

“You were working together all along,” Peter said flatly. “You and the King and the Bishop.”

Deucalion raised a brow. “Why else would I volunteer to saddle myself with you? I suppose betrayal runs in the family. Although you’re not *actually* my family, are you? Just some unholy bastard my brother was saddled with. I’ll be sure to let him know I cut your throat before I take the kingdom. It’s only the brotherly thing to do.”

Peter sneered, keeping one eye on Allison’s hand as his lip rolled up. “Why should I need your blood? Or my father’s? I may never have been a Hale, but I am an *Argent*, and we are far greater than your petty plots.”

“*Enough.*” Gerard slammed his fist down on the arm of the throne. “You see she still lives. Now drop your weapons before I tell your uncle to slit her throat.”

“You’re going to kill her anyway,” Peter spit out.

Gerard shrugged. “True. But you cannot take the risk, can you? That you might find some way to out maneuver me? That those two bitches out there fighting your war might somehow prevail and find you. Futile hope will always defeat you in the end. Won’t it, Christopher?”

Chris licked his lips, his jaw jumping as he swallowed dryly. He slowly lowered his sword toward the floor.

“Christopher,” Peter said warningly.

Chris shook his head. “Do what he says, Peter. Please. It is a chance, at least.” He turned his head just slightly, his eyes widening meaningfully as he cut his gaze back toward Deucalion and Allison. Her fingertips were just underneath her sleeve, and as he watched, they moved another centimeter higher.

Peter’s lips twitched just a millimeter, and then he nodded. “Alright.” He bent his knees enough so that he could let his sword clatter to the floor. Beside him, Chris did the same.

“Ah ah ah,” Gerard tutted. “The daggers, too, Christopher. Both of them.” Chris

snarled but did as instructed, unstrapping the daggers from beneath his sleeves and placing them with the swords.

“Excellent.” Gerard stapled his fingers together. “Now I cannot quite decide. Shall I kill you now, or wait until you know my victory is complete? When all the palace loyal to you is dead? Or should I let you watch while Deucalion kills my granddaughter and your whore? Yes, I think I quite like that one.”

Allison’s fingers moved beneath the cloth, twisting in a method Peter was most familiar with. He and Chris exchanged glances, and Peter cleared his throat.

“Tell me, dear uncle, where are your fangs? Or has the king deluded you into thinking you won’t be purged with every other human here? I had at least hoped you would have gotten a smidgen of my father’s brain.”

Deucalion’s exasperated sigh was an exact duplicate of Peter’s father, and it was only with great effort Peter was able to keep the knee jerk snarl from his lips. “Driving the wedge is such a juvenile trick. Unworthy of your upbringing, even if you didn’t have the breeding. Our alliance is secure, nephew. The turning is not a quiet thing, nor without peril. There has not yet been time.”

“Thank you. That’s all we needed to know. Bratling, *now!*”

Allison’s blade dropped into her hand and she twisted, driving it deep into Deucalion’s forearm. He howled, loosening his grip, and Allison spun away as Chris dived for his sword. Peter dropped to one knee and reached into his waistcoat, withdrawing the pistol he had earlier retrieved from his room, because swords might be all the rage against the Undead, but sometimes a well aimed bullet—

He sighted and pulled the trigger, and a perfect, bloody hole appeared between Deucalion’s eyes. He had the most gratifying look of surprise upon his face as he fell to his knees and swayed there for half a second before collapsing on his face. But Peter was given no time to revel on the fact. One moment Gerard was upon his throne, and in the next blink, too fast for Peter to see more than a blur, he was standing in front of him.

His hand closed around Peter’s throat, and with far too much strength for an old man he lifted him from his knees, until Peter was held above him like a rag doll, his feet dangling inches from the floor. Peter scrabbled futilely at his fingers,

feeling darkness creeping around the edges of his vision as his windpipe was slowly crushed with a wet, popping sound.

Chris must have done something, made some kind of move, because Gerard's eyes flashed red and claws pierced Peter's skin. "Not another move, *son*, or I remove his lungs from his —"

He cut off with a shocked, gurgling sound, as the point of a blade impaled his throat. He roared, swinging an arm out behind him, but missing when Allison skittered back triumphantly. Then the world spun as Peter was flung through the air, burning pain shooting through his shoulder as he slammed into a wall and then the floor.

He struggled to find his feet, the world still spinning queasily about him, and then it was a moot point, because Chris was there, using his palm to slam Allison's dagger deeper through Gerard's throat. In a move reminiscent of Chris' earlier tactics, Allison dropped and swung her foot out, catching Gerard's ankles and pulling them out from under him. Chris' foot was immediately on his chest, pinning him down with his sword pressed into his neck.

"I'm sorry, Father," Chris said quietly. Peter opened his mouth to indignantly demand *what* exactly his husband could be sorry for, but he snapped it shut again almost immediately as a wave of nausea swept over him. He refused to empty his stomach in front of Gerard. And besides, Chris was doing a well enough job of qualifying his words.

"I'm sorry I did not kill you the first time, when I first had the chance. I am sorry I let it get this far. But I shall rectify that now."

Gerard laughed hoarsely, his voice weak and rough as sandpaper. "Go ahead, my son. You may kill me, but I will still have won. *I have still won.*" He chuckled again, then fell silent, staring up at Chris with eyes that spoke of hatred, and of madness, but not the slightest bit of fear."

"I suppose we shall see, Father. Allison, cover your eyes. *Allison.*" Peter wanted to chuckle at the stubborn look the little beastie shot her father, but the pain in his shoulder was spreading across his chest. Frankly, he was embarrassed a tiny bit of jarring was affecting him so. He had been beaten far more thoroughly in Genovia, with barely a bruise to show for it.

“Allison,” Chris said a third time, and she finally obeyed, closing her eyes. “Your highness,” Chris intoned formally, “you have been found guilty of high treason against the crown and people of Befastia. As sitting ruler and judge, I sentence you to death, with the sentence to be carried out immediately.”

Chris raised his sword and Gerard laughed once more as the blade swung down. He never closed his eyes, not even when the sword severed his head with a sickening thud. The force of the blow spun it away from the still twitching body; it rolled a foot, maybe two, before coming to rest facing Peter, its eyes still staring wide.

Chris dropped his sword and raced to Allison, swinging her into his arms and hugging her tightly, his face pressed into her hair. “You did so well, my little arrow. So well. Did she not, Peter?” He looked to Peter, his eyes tight around the corners, but still shining with relief and joy.

Chris took a step - likely to come to him, Peter thought - as he began to slowly and painfully push himself upright, using the wall as support. “That she did, prince.” His voice sounded far away to his own ears. “I think the country shall be safe in her hands.” He finally managed to stand. “Myself, on the other hand, am a little worse for wear, I’m afraid. But give me a moment and — Christopher?”

Chris had frozen, all the joy and relief in his face fading away into fear and horror. Beside him, Allison whimpered, completely transformed from the warrior of seconds ago back into the child she rightfully was.

“Christopher, what’s wrong?”

“No. *Nonononono*.” Chris leapt over Gerard’s body in his haste to reach Peter’s side. “Your *shoulder*.”

“I know, I know.” Peter tried to wave his concern off but his body was strangely heavy. “I believed I jammed the socket when I hit the wall.” He touched it, and then started. His fingers had come away wet with blood. “Wha—”

“Peter...Peter look at me. It’s fine. Peter it’s going to be fine.” Chris’ fingers were on his face, his voice strained and desperate. “Peter, don’t—”

“Of course it’s fine!” He swatted ineffectually at Chris’ hands and let his head

fall to the side. “Why wouldn’t it be fi—”

It was not fine. He suddenly recalled the pain in his shoulder had started *before* Gerard threw him. Which made sense, as there was a perfect, jagged, bloody bite mark set deep into the muscle of his shoulder.

“Oh, God,” he murmured quietly, turning his face back to Chris. “I’m so sorry, Christopher. I am so very sorry.” Then his indignity was finally complete, as his stomach rebelled and he lurched, vomiting all over Chris’ boots. “Damn.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and then his knees gave out all over again. Chris caught him about the waist and lowered him to the floor.

“What...what are you apologizing for? You did not...you did not commit any trespass.” Chris’ face was pale and he grabbed hold of Peter’s sleeve and ripped it away from the wound. “Allison, find some water!”

“Christopher.” Peter pulled Chris’ hand away and then cupped his face in his palms. There were odd spots dancing in his vision and he squinted to force himself to focus. “Stop. That will not help. You know there is nothing to be done. I am so sorry. So sorry to put you through this again.” He smiled gamely. “Look! An Argent after all.” He was terrified. Utterly and completely terrified. If there was one thing he knew, it was that he did *not* want to die. But he could lie for Chris. He could do this to make it as easy as possible. It would of course be now, when the maw of death opened before him, that he could fully appreciate what Victoria had done. There would be no three hours for him. She had been built of sterner stuff.

“No.” Chris’ nostrils flared. “I will not...I will *not*. This is not happening. This will not happen. We can....We will find Melissa. Use the serum.”

The spots in his vision were spreading, meeting each other and blocking out whole portions of his sight line. “It does not work, Christopher, you know that. It will not help.” He looked over Chris’ shoulder, to where Allison hovered, caught between obeying her father’s order and not wanting to leave the two of them alone. “Listen to me, beastie. You make sure your father does the right thing. You know how stubborn he is. But you do this for me, alright? And make sure he does not do that annoying martyr thing for too long. You remind him this was not his fault.”

He turned back to Chris. “This was not your fault. You will promise me you

believe that. You will do that for me. Because I will not ask you to wield the sword. I will not let you. You find Kali or Jennifer. You will let them carry this out. Not you. You will not carry my death on your shoulders.”

Chris’ mouth was snarling and he was pointedly not meeting Peter’s eyes, still working to somehow bind or patch his shoulder.

“Christopher!” Peter insisted. “You swear this to me!”

“We don’t know that it does not work,” Chris said stubbornly, shaking his head. “We only used Gerard. He was already turned, stacking the deck. Of course Melissa did not get the expected results!”

“What?” Peter blinked sluggishly, somehow having lost the train of Chris’ words amid the new ringing in his ears. It was interspersed with a frantic *thump thump thump*, almost like a heartbeat.

It was a heartbeat.

Chris’ heartbeat.

It and the ringing were almost all he could hear. His head suddenly became too heavy to hold up and he let it loll against the wall.

“Peter? *Peter.*” Chris grabbed his face and shook it, and Peter forced his eyes back open to squint hazily up at him.

“Melissa,” Chris said desperately, scooping him into his arms and standing. “We will find Melissa and Lydia. We will fix this. Allison! We have to go!”

“You are a silly man, prince,” Peter murmured, the smells around him abruptly becoming so intense he gagged, his stomach threatening to start heaving all over again.

“Shhh...” There was a bang and a jolt, probably from Chris kicking the door open. Allison went before them, her dagger in one hand and Peter’s pistol in the other. Good girl. “Rest, Peter. We will repair this.”

“I remember you,” Peter said suddenly. Nonsensically.

There was a stumble in Chris' stride before he recovered. "What? Peter, don't —"

"I remember you," he insisted, even though his voice sounded weak and thready to his own ears. "That first time you came to Genovia with Gerard. I must have been five...six. I spied on you and Talia. You were tall, and golden, and you smiled all the time. Gerard had not stolen it yet." He realized he was rambling, and pulled himself back with great effort.

"I was so *angry*. I wanted to pummel you with my fists and tear at you with my teeth. I thought it was because you were taking the attention of the one person I knew loved me. But I think I was wrong. I think I knew...even then...that you were supposed to be *mine*. That *I* was supposed to get to love you."

There was a skip in Chris' heartbeat and Peter vaguely realized he had never actually gotten around to telling Chris he did love him, even though he had implied as much yesterday in the passage. Ah well, at least his prince could be sure now.

The darkness was almost complete, and there was a dichotomy running in his blood. He was so very, very tired. Wanted to simply close his eyes and rest against Chris' chest and listen to his heartbeat until Kali or Jennifer or someone separated his head from his body. But underneath the weariness was something growing. Something that wanted to lash out and run and rend. And it was telling him that it was alright. That he could go ahead and go to sleep. Because it would take care of the rest.

And really, he was so very, very tired.

He burrowed further into Chris' arms and let his eyes fall shut. "I did get you in the end though, didn't I," he slurred. "At least for a little while."

From far away he heard Chris bellow, "*Melissa!*" but by that time it was too late. He had already slipped away.

Chapter 11

*Sing your death song,
and die like a hero going home.*

-Tecumseh

Chapter 12

The light was too bright. That was the first thing that crossed his mind as his eyes fluttered open and then shut and then open again. The next was that he couldn't *breathe*. Closer inspection revealed the cause of that to be Chris' fully clothed body sprawled almost entirely on top of him. They were on a bed. Chris' bed.

Which led to his third thought.

He should not be waking up at all.

Carefully, so as not to wake Chris prematurely, he ran his tongue over his teeth and his thumb over his fingernails. Both were blunt and human. He couldn't reach his face, because his arms were trapped under Chris' weight, but it *felt* normal. But when he shifted and inched and maneuvered enough so that he could actually see one hand, the tips of his fingers were stained red.

"*Christopher*," he hissed, his voice coming out hoarse and rough, as if he had been screaming for an extended period of time.

There was no slow, befuddled transition from sleep to awareness for Chris, no soft, sleepy confusion where his eyes slowly opened and focused. The second his name left Peter's mouth Chris lurched bolt upright, his eyes wide and searching and his hands running restless and worried over Peter's body.

"You're awake." He closed his eyes momentarily and looked for all the world like he was offering up a silent prayer. Which would have been hilarious if Peter was in any mood for humor, because Chris was *not* a praying man, rote or otherwise. He struggled to sit up, only to be stymied by Chris shaking his head and planting a hand on his shoulder. And whatever his body had been up to, it had left him weak enough that, humiliatingly, that gentle pressure was enough to keep him down.

"Don't tax yourself. Here. Wait." He slipped an arm under Peter's shoulders and lifted him, as he took a glass of water from the nightstand. "Here, drink this."

He held the glass to Peter's lips, and Peter, suddenly realizing how parched he was, drank, then gulped, then sputtered as he choked on the liquid.

“Careful,” Chris murmured, putting the glass away and then pressing his forehead to Peter’s temple, all the weight of the world released in the sigh he made against Peter’s cheek. “Peter. You woke up. You’re alright. You’re alright. *God*. I forbid you to ever scare me like that again. Do you understand me? *Forbid*.”

He sat up again and fumbled around for a moment. “You should rest. I need to... I need to find Melissa. Let her know we have an approximate time. She will want to check you over. And Allison wants to see you. You would be so proud of her, she’s—”

Peter grabbed his wrist as firmly as he could and said steely hard, “Christopher. What did you *do*? You have to get someone to *finish this*. I will not...I will *not* hurt you or Allison because you are being *delusional* and keeping me—”

“No. No, no.” Finally the slightly lost, wonderstruck look melted away, replaced by a fierce kind of joy that was almost blinding in its burning brightness. “You are fine. You are not turning. It has been over twenty four hours. The serum *worked*. *It worked*.”

“It worked. It worked?” Angry disbelief colored his tone as he thrust his hand out in front of him, bloody fingertips on display. “Then explain you these, prince. Explain why the wound is gone!” He touched his palm to his bare shoulder, where the skin lay smooth and unbroken again.

Chris hesitated, eyes darting away before returning to Peter’s face. “It was... touch and go at first. Before we could find Melissa. Before we could carve a path through the chaos to get to her laboratory.”

All at once Peter remembered they were fighting a war for survival. That their little tragedy had only been a brush stroke on a much larger canvas. “What became of the undead? Are we safe?” He gripped Chris’ upper arms and demanded, “Is the town safe? What of the soldiers? How many have we lost?”

“Peter...Peter. Breathe easy. I was truthful when I told you all was well. The Ladies Blake rallied the soldiers and drove them back. We found the tunnels and set them aflame. Sent the fires all the way to the mouth of the *mountains*.” There was a savage satisfaction on his face and Peter was quite sure Chris’ joy in the slaughter was not supposed to make him want to grab his face and kiss him, was not supposed to start a burning low in his belly. But Peter had very rarely had

reactions apropos to their causes, so he was not sure he could blame this on the bite.

He emerged from his musing and realized Chris was holding himself very carefully and doing his best not to wince. Peter could not determine the cause until he looked at his hands, saw the bloody bandage beneath one palm he had unwittingly been pressing against.

He let go as if burned by the self same fire Chris had described, darting his gaze between the bandage and his nails and Chris' face. "I hurt you. This is your blood, is it not? I began to turn, didn't I? I turned and I hurt you and still you refused to *put me down*."

Chris licked his lips and then carefully caught Peter's hands in his own. "You were fighting, trying to change before Melissa could prepare the inoculation. I had to hold you down so she could administer it. The wound is not so bad. Barely a scratch. I was distracted and it was mainly my own fault.

"You *fool*." Peter was aghast and furious and unable to decide if he wanted to crawl under the covers and hide in shame or punch Chris in the face for the risk he took.

"But it *worked*, Peter. It worked and the change reversed, and Melissa was able to use your blood on the other bitten. You saved *dozens*."

Peter scoffed at the praise. "Nothing extraordinary there. She could have pricked any fool and used their blood."

"No. No, you are wrong. She did. Try. When your change subsided and you fell still, she used the serum on others. It worked as it did with you, but when she ran out and began creating more, it did not work. It did not work and we had to put them down, until she used yours. *Yours* worked. If we inoculated them early enough, the changed stopped. It was *you*."

Peter rather thought it had less to do with him and more to do with Gerard's cryptic words about not being like *that rabble*, but Chris looked so entirely pleased with the idea that Peter had done something extraordinary that he wasn't about to disabuse him of the notion. If Peter had his way, he would keep Chris looking at him like that forever.

“So all truly is well then?” He could not quite accept it, and when Chris’ gaze skittered away again before returning, he knew he had been right to doubt.

“Well enough.” Chris touched his hand. “And now I really should fetch Melissa. And food. I’ll wager you’re starving.”

He was, but not enough to get distracted by Chris’ blatant ploys. He grabbed Chris by his rumpled waistcoat and tugged him back down. “Christopher. Tell me the truth.”

“I *have*—”

“The *truth*, Christopher. Not the version of it you are comfortable with, or think will make me most biddable. You promised our equality. Now prove it.”

Chris’ mouth tightened at the corners, but he finally nodded. “Melissa’s apprentice...Lydia...she took to looking at the blood through her microscope. And there are...differences. Between yours and mine.”

“Between yours and mine? You mean between the bitten and *human*.”

“No! No that is not what it —”

“We are not fine. We are not fine! Nothing has been saved! You have no idea what might happen! I could turn to you in the middle of the night and rip your throat out! Rip Allison’s —”

Chris gripped Peter’s face in his hand, fingers digging into his chin almost to the point of pain, and shook him hard enough that Peter’s mouth snapped shut. “No. Listen to me. For once in your life, you will *shut up* and listen! That is *not* what it means. Do you understand me? Your blood may not be like mine, but it is not like *theirs* either. It is something altogether new. You were changing and then we gave you the serum, and the change stopped. And then you would not wake, and we were worried *that* would be the cost. But you *have*, so now we know the other will, too. And it is *enough*.”

He shook Peter again before kissing him hard on the mouth and yanking him into his arms. His embrace was warm and secure and strong, and Peter found himself clutching back just as greedily.

Chris' breath gusted warm against his cheek as he whispered again, "It is enough, Peter."

The bedroom door banged open and Allison barged in, hair in disarray and out of breath. "Father? I thought I heard — Peter! You're awake!"

She charged across the room, barely giving Chris enough time sit back before she leapt into the bed and threw her arms around Peter's neck. "I knew you would wake up. I told Father so."

"Can't...breathe...bratling!" Peter gasped dramatically, the heaviness of the affair becoming entirely too much for him. The warm contentment settling in his belly and chest was still something to which he wasn't quite yet accustomed.

Allison let go with a snicker and settled between he and Chris, bouncing up and down in a way that was sure to induce sea sickness before too long. Peter tugged at a loose strand of her hair.

"I hear you acquitted yourself well, little beastie."

She stuck her nose in the air and said haughtily, "Yes, indeed I did," before breaking into a self satisfied smirk that was one hundred percent her father's. "Also, Scott did so well helping his father defend the stables - he *killed* two of the undead all on his own! - that father is going to *knight* him once everyone is well and the palace is put together again. With a ceremony! It has been years since we have knighted anyone!"

She was fairly vibrating with excitement. Peter met Chris' eyes over Allison's head and raised an eyebrow. Chris shrugged unrepentant, that tiny, happy smile playing just around the corners of his mouth. Trust Chris to find a way to remove obstacles from true love's path, even amidst a sea of tragedy.

Allison shifted and wriggled until she was snuggled between them, and Chris settled back against the headboard, wrapping an arm around them both. There was much work to be done, and too many questions still left unanswered, but Peter let the worry slip away as he tangled one hand with Chris' and relaxed into his embrace.

His prince was right. For once, it was enough.

Epilogue

Music swelled through the crowded ballroom, the lights from the chandelier and lamps reflecting through the walls of mirrors like a thousand twinkling stars. The murmur of dancers and diners filled the room, and household servants, dressed in their finest livery, weaved among them, offering flutes of champagne and Hor d'oeuvres on gilded trays.

It was good, Chris thought, as he moved through the room greeting their guests, a mixture of Befastia nobility and treaty families. In the six months since the invasion, they had rebuilt the palace, scrubbed it clean of any traces of death and gore, and Chris had taken special care to restore the ballroom to its former glory.

With spring upon them, Chris had felt it time to revisit the treaty, mark out some of the older, more archaic passages, and reshape it based upon all they had since learned. With that in mind, he had invited all the treaty members to Befastia to hold council, to actually visit the country that stood between them and the mountains, with Allison, newly crowned, sitting in with a voting voice for the first time. That would begin tomorrow, and already promised to be long and arduous and headache inducing, but tonight was all about the pleasantries and forms, about him finally giving Peter his long overdue Christmas present.

The ghost of Victoria was still here, but it felt lighter, more benevolent, less judgmental of his youthful mistakes. He thought she would be proud of how far they had come.

Peter looked up from across the room, where he was engaged in deep conversation with the Ladies Blake, and caught Chris watching him. He smiled, bright and wide and blindingly beautiful. That, more than anything, made it all worthwhile, and Chris felt his own face creasing in response.

“He looks happy.” Chris turned to find Talia at his elbow, empty champagne flute in hand as she watched her brother affectionately. “Thank you.”

Chris took her glass and placed it on a passing servant's tray, before holding out his arm. “Would you do me the honor?”

She smiled and acquiesced, and he led them out as the musicians began a new

number.

“It is I who should be thanking you, Talia.”

“You forgive me then? For the subterfuge.”

He smiled briefly as they walked a pace and then turned, separating to pass down the line and then returning to pairs. “I never begrudged you in the first place. I understood your necessity, if not the entire purpose. And I know you only meant for the best.”

“Genovia was killing him,” she confessed quietly. “Letting only that which was ill and angry take root while slowly smothering all those parts that had always redeemed him. His rebellion was really a blessing in disguise. It gave me the excuse to send him to you. I do not know why Genovia vexed him so, but I believed Befastia could heal him.”

Chris did know, but that was Peter’s secret, and not for him to share. “I like to think it has.”

Talia grinned slyly. “I tend to think that had more to do with you than your country. But what *of* you, your highness? Has your heart healed? I know it is delicate matters I touch upon, especially in company, but I would know if the exchange has stood for you as well.”

Chris looked back to Peter, and he did not have to pretend to the smile that spontaneously spread across his face. “Very much so. Yes.”

It was not perfect, of course. In the months since he was bitten, there were nights Peter woke him up, in pain and hunched in on himself, demanding Chris push him into the mattress, pin him down and take him with a roughness that bordered on violence, until whatever was crawling through him had passed. And there were nights when *Chris* would wake, face pressed into the bedsheets and Peter’s fingers already working him open, never unwelcome but always signifying something *more* was moving in Peter’s blood.

It had slowed as the weather had warmed, reflecting the cycle they had noted in the undead attacks, and while they had yet to determine the exact cause, Chris knew from Deaton’s reports that similar peculiarities were showing up amongst all of the bitten, although those soldiers now inoculated *prior* to attacks at the

pass had not shown any such after effects.

But Peter was still alive, and Peter was still *his*, and everyone had stayed human, so Chris would continue to count this a win. And with the knowledge they had gained from the Palace siege and the interrogation of Bishop Harris, they were prepared to again mount an exploratory expedition over the mountain, this time with Chris and Peter at its head. For the first time in decades the people had real hope that they might one day see an end to the conflict.

Peter must have felt Chris' eyes on him, because he again looked up and caught him staring. And while his smile for Chris stayed the same, the moment his gaze slid to Talia his expression hardened and he abruptly turned away.

Talia sighed. "You may have forgiven me, but he has not."

Chris made a sympathetic noise but refused to lie. "No." Peter had been present to greet Talia when she had arrived yesterday, but had quickly found reason to excuse himself. And the only thing that had saved the intervening meals from becoming unbearably awkward had been Allison's happy chatter and her easy ability to draw everyone into her conversations. "You must give him time. Be patient. He will come around eventually. Underneath his pain he knows you acted for his good."

"Hmm...I seem to remember giving you similar advice once, your highness."

"And it still holds true. So I hope you will take it in return." He nodded to Talia's husband, standing at the side and chatting with Lady Paige and her husband, but occasionally casting glances at his wife. Chris did not think he was imagining the warmth in them. "I think your husband is ready to have you returned. But first you must tell me - how did he take the news of the undead? How did you manage to convince him you were not simply mad?" It was very unusual for new families to be brought into the fold, especially as inheritance on the continent was patrilineal, but with Talia set to take over the Hale family's position on the council, it had become necessary to reveal their secret.

Her lips twisted wryly. "It was somewhat touch and go, I must admit, but Phillipe trusts me. And has enough of an imagination to believe in the possibilities." She looked over her shoulder at Phillipe and her smile softened. "We work well together."

“That is good to hear. It would be troubling if mine and Peter’s happiness had been bought at the cost of your own.”

She laughed, amused, as he began to lead her off the floor. “Well you may set your mind at ease. And if my dear brother ever deigns to speak with me, I would let him know his power grab resulted in a rush of reforms being pushed through, as well as a parliament being formed. Both the Hales and the Renaldi’s have ended up with far more power than before. He was far more successful than we expected.”

He eyed her askance, one brow rising. “One would almost think you knew of Peter’s actions and chose to do nothing.”

She smiled serenely as they reached Phillipe. “One would. Almost.” Then she turned to Phillipe and kissed his cheek, effectively ending the conversation. “Shall we take a turn, husband?”

Chris bowed. “Phillipe. I look forward to hearing both of your thoughts tomorrow as to our path forward. But as for now...” He finally gave into the pull that had been drawing him all evening, despite knowing the discord it might cause. “...I think I should like to dance with my husband.”

Phillipe, to his credit, did a very good job of masking his shock, while Talia looked nothing but approving. The treaty families had known, of course, of he and Peter’s marriage, but it was accepted courtesy not to rub it so blatantly in their faces; he and Peter had agreed a successful council was more important than the ever present need they had developed to be in each others space - *that* would have been considered improper even *had* one of them been a woman.

Chris was tired of being courteous.

He excused himself one final time and made his way to Peter, cutting Jennifer off mid sentence as he inserted himself into the conversation.

“Prince Consort, would you care to join me for a dance?” The orchestra had just struck up a waltz, and if there was any time to scandalize their guests, it was now.

One corner of Peter’s mouth turned up, and then the other, as a slow, pleased smile spread over his face. Unheeding of the murmurs rising around them, he

placed his hand on Chris' arm.

"I thought you would never ask, Prince."

Yes, thought Chris, as he led Peter to the floor and placed one gloved hand against his, this was more than enough, indeed.

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